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DID HUXLEY DIE?
PAGE 18

MMO REVIEWS

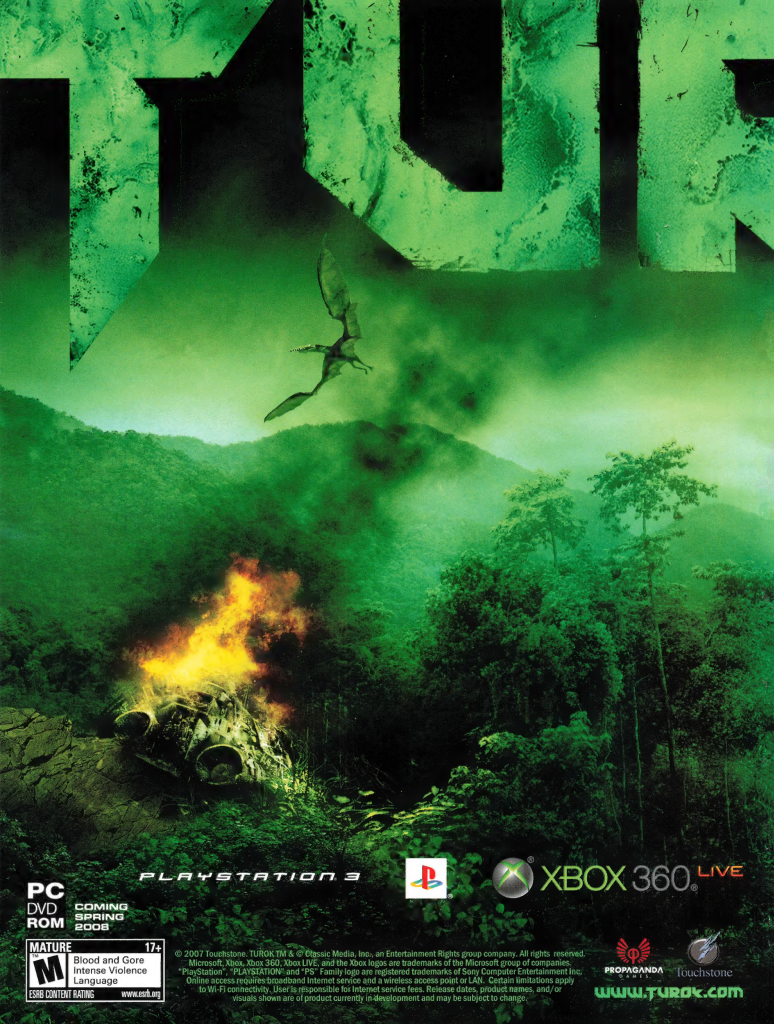
TABULA RASA

EVERQUEST 2 AND FINAL FANTASY XI EXPANSIONS

TRUTHINESS HURTS

WHY GUILDS SUCK

THEY JUST DON'T MAKE 'EM LIKE THEY USED TO



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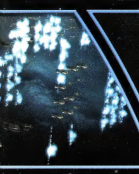

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Games for Windows

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Contents? Who the heck uses Contents?

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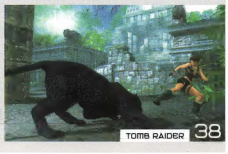

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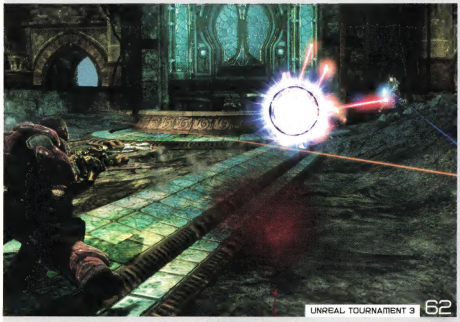

DEPARTMENTS (CONT.)

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Unreal Tournament 3 and *Tabula Rasa* are both released from their centuries-long growth chambers, and we've got the final verdicts. If that ain't your thing, kick back with the colorful critters in *Viva Piñata* or witness the terrifying spectacle that is *BlackSite: Area 51*.

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW15.1UP.COM

So you played through all 52 free games already, huh? Fortunately, we have lots more at 1UP.com! Plus: more Delay of Game goodies, along with the newest *Duke Nukem Forever* trailer.

1UP NETWORK

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Games for Windows

XBOX 360 LIVE

FREE YOURSELF

A cure for that expensive gaming addiction

This month, we're doing a story that always makes me happy: our annual free games roundup. I love this because, first of all, who doesn't like "free"? Nobody, that's who. Especially these days, given how expensive PC games have become, and how, ya know, the entire economy is sliding into the gutter. When your every next purchase is a small fortune, and when even that doesn't necessarily guarantee that the damn thing is either going to be 1) fun or 2) playable without 2GB worth of patches, well, it tends to put a damper on the whole experience. It's even worse if you've been put on a short leash with your gaming purchases because of your mean, nongaming, stingy parents, spouse, or partner. If they are unsympathetic toward your gaming habit (and if they are, I recommend dumping them), then each new purchase becomes an extra source of stress.

This, of course, is where free games come in. Your loved ones may not like that you're still gaming, but at least they can't complain that you're wasting money that could be put to more supposedly "useful" purposes, such as food for your children. (How about they just get jobs instead?) The only problem with free games is that there are so freaking many of them that it's hard to know where to start. No, that's not entirely true. Most of us start with (and never get beyond) *Solitaire*, *FreeCell*, and *Minesweeper*. And hey, that's OK. Great games, all of them. But there's so much great stuff beyond this that it always pains me a little when I see someone at a café or on a plane playing something like that on their laptop. Usually in these situations, I just rip the laptop out of their hands and scream at them for wasting the machine. Then I bash them over the head with it to make sure my point is clear.

In any event, this is all really just to say that you should stop reading this blather and skip over to our 52 Free Games feature on page 49. Why 52? Because there are 52 weeks in the year, and we have, as a public service, culled the 8 zillion free games online down to one new good one for each week—a way for you to satisfy your addiction for something new without breaking the bank or landing you in the doghouse. I can't guarantee that every one of these is going to pack the same punch or deliver the same kind of satisfaction as an *Orange Box* or *BioShock* or *Call of Duty 4*. But, hey, that's not the point. The point is: free. And in this case, you get a lot more than you paid for.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft*, *Guitar Hero 3*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

After finishing *Mass Effect* for the Xbox 360, Sean has a very long list of things he'd like BioWare not to do in *Dragon Age*. He'll send it to you if you like.

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft*, *Armageddon Empires*, *Humpsters*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan's *World of WarCraft* addiction shows no immediate signs of slowing down. Next month: 12-step program.

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft*, *Maniac Mansion Mania*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

After spending an evening wandering around the Citadel in *Mass Effect*, Michael would like to add a request for one jetpack to Sean's list.

Now Playing: *Mass Effect* (Xbox 360)
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren wishes to thank all the "little people." That is, the indie game developers who remind everyone what this industry should be about—fun.

Now Playing: *Quest Fighter II*, *Acidbomb 2: Reanimed*, *Crayon Physics Deluxe*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

Shawn is amazed and confused at the way *Cudgel of Xanthor* is getting praised in reviews.

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes*, *Cutter Crew*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Rosie would like to take this space to thank the GFW staff for creating a useless crap pile on her desk. She is now well stocked up on back shavers and Christmas stockings.

Now Playing: The usual
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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A COMEDY THAT HITS WHERE IT HURTS!

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Letters

Ruining fun since 1982

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We never realized how awesome that robot was until now.

DAIKATANA FANS UNITE

And *Computer Gamer for Windows of Whatever you're called now!* At the bottom of the "Heathenizers" column (*GFW* #14, pg. 73)—Daikatana should not be on that list. It deserved more than a 2.5 out of 5. In your current scoring, it should at least be a 3.10 out of 10! How dare you defile my master's game! I hope you die in the depths of hell, with little frog men slowly licking your faces off. Daikatana is a good game, not a piece-of-flaming-s**t game. I hope you die!

John Romero's one and only bitch

Y'know, you're right—we didn't do justice to John Romero's magnum opus in that tiny little entry. That's why we've decided to blow the dust off our copy of *Daikatana* to look back and see what went wrong (see pg. 29). You're welcome!

SPOILER ALERT: WE SUCK!

In your December issue, the review of *Clive Barker's Jericho* (*GFW* #13, pg. 70) starts with a "spoiler alert." Huh? I had wanted to play the game, but the review just ruined the ending. That's like the people behind you at the movie saying, "Oh, I saw this movie; he doesn't know he's dead." Then Shawn Elliott writes what looks like a great set of articles ("Beyond the Box," pg. 55), which I can't read either because it's prefaced with "WARNING: SPOILERS." I haven't played *The Orange Box* yet, and I suspect that not everyone in the gamingsphere has either. So thanks, Shawn, for all the time and effort you put into this article, which you've just told me not to read.

I'm sick of game magazines and podcasts justifying spoilers just because they preface it with some warning. We need to promote the experience, not ruin the surprises and endings.

Jeff LaBelle

Sorry you feel like we ruined *Jericho*'s ending, but we were just trying to point out how the game managed to ruin it all on its own.

FIGHTING WORDS

Please allow me to clear up Bruce Geryk's confusion (*GFW* #13, pg. 80) as to which branch of the military (or the United States Army, at least) is the Queen of Battle. As an Army Ranger, I can assure you that the infantry proudly bears that title. Field artillery, meanwhile, is the King of Battle. You're rubbing many soldiers the wrong way with that mix-up!

Incidentally, I couldn't tell you what the armor call themselves, but we call them "targets."

1LT Matt Dudevoir

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

Two letters to the editor in your recent magazine (*GFW* #13, pg. 14) caught my attention. The first you titled "Another Era." Granted, the author had a bit of historical nostalgia. However, you chose to print the letter seemingly for the sole purpose of ridiculing him both with the editor's reply and with the photo caption. This is the equivalent of picking on the weak kid on the playground. Are you proud of yourselves?

Your contempt for someone who misses the old *Computer Gaming World* magazine sent a clear signal to the rest of us that also miss *Computer Gaming World*. "You are not welcome here, old timers."

This impression was further confirmed by the second letter that caught my attention—the Mail Byte from Dan. "Your mom!" is the sort of immature drivel that would not have appeared in *Computer Gaming World*. In publishing it, you further alienated those subscribers that came to you from *Computer Gaming World* without ever having signed up for this new magazine.

While I wish you luck in your endeavors with *GFW*, I want to have no part in it.

Ed Chapman

:(

REVIEW LOVE, REVIEW HATE

What is with the 7-out-of-10 rating for *SimCity Societies*? First, throw out the fact that it destroys one of the most entertaining and fulfilling franchises in gaming history. Second, it doesn't deliver what it promised: The city's atmosphere does not react from what you build. Instead, what's built is built, in what's basically a sandbox mode. >

MAIL BYTES

Hey Freeloader: Thanks for allowing me to feed my gaming habit while still being able to feed my kids. May your cubicles run forever.

Larry Lange

I wonder why *Runescape* barely gets mentioned in *GFW*. Has it ever? I can't remember) when it has over 6 million active players.

Paul Ott

I hope, for the sake of all civilization, that Andorianne is in your indisputable Hall of Fame...

R.I.P. Ian Storm.

Paul Eley

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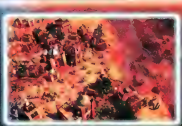

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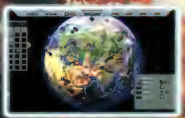

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So we have a game that's robbed of all of what gave *SimCity* its greatness: The cities don't grow, and there's *no* challenge. It's like *Zoo Tycoon* without the animals, and by no means from every standpoint is *Zoo Tycoon* this bad (even if it had no animals).

Your review was plain idiocy.

Andrew Peet

You might want to check out the 700 or so words of text next to the score—that should clear up any confusion you have as to why we gave the game the score we gave it.

I truly appreciate *GFW*'s approach to videogame reviews. Simply assigning a score and a nice summary to a game is not enough to spark my interest. What really gets me excited about gaming is the critical analysis of the industry that *GFW* provides. It's fun to "eavesdrop" on your conversations from week to week on the podcast and learn not only about new games but also about the people and organizations behind those games. I can get information from any Joe Schmo on the Internet with a blog, but what keeps me coming back is the fact that *GFW* doesn't settle for 5 out of 10. You say the things that need to be said, and you offer valuable analysis on various games and issues. I oftentimes don't agree with you, but your analysis forces me to think about why I prefer certain types of games over others. Because of this thought process, I find myself enjoying a larger percentage of games that I purchase for reasons I can clearly identify.

Please continue to do what you are doing. I'm sure it's demoralizing when somebody on the message boards gives you a hard time for reviewing a game less favorably than they would have, but know that I respect you guys for being willing to write reviews that accurately represent your actual experience with the game and not what you had hoped it would be. Thanks for your hard work and your engaging material.

Greg Baker

I'd like to say your January 2008 issue (*GFW* #14) was superb. I hope this is more than a mere trend. Your reviews were dead on, and I enjoyed the way you interviewed game developers at the end of the review. And the review for *Hellgate: London*—wow! No GameSpot drama here! You guys truly call the shots as you see them. And it was nice seeing *Tabula Rasa* addressed in your Reviews Wrap-Up. I was beginning to think it was going to get away completely unscathed.

Edward Burton

When I initially read your editorial touting how you use the entire 10-point scale, I thought "who cares." All that matters is that I know what a reviewer means when they give a game a specific score. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that your method is actually inferior to the method used by most other reviews. The reason is that the other method is so familiar to everyone. Most people in the U.S. grow up receiving grades on a similar scale (A, B , C, D, and F). Just as kilometers, kilograms, and Celsius have less meaning to me than miles, pounds, and Fahrenheit, your 5 out of 10 means a little less to me than the other guys' 71 percent. While the benefits of switching to the metric system are obvious, I don't see any benefit to scoring differently than everyone else. It's just a minor annoyance.

Jose Pacheco

TOUCHÉ

In Greenspeak (*GFW* #14, pg. 96), Jeff writes: "Design a game box that won't make people think I'm a pervert or moron if they see me with it."

This is the same issue that has me turning the magazine sideways, centerfold-style, to read a story called "Money Shot" (pg. 20), featuring a nearly naked CG character. Try doing that in a public airport terminal and see what kind of looks you get.

Adam Spragg

THAT'S RICH...

I have found myself completely skipping the last several pages of your magazine, as I know it's obviously not for me. Is there anyone that reads *GFW* who can afford the rigs you review in the Tech section? $5,000! $6,000! $7,000! Sure, that would be a dream system if everyone worked for play money, but how about some reviews of "affordable" systems? I've got a decent job, and I could swing a $2,500 gaming rig. Until you quit catering to the Donald Trumps of the gaming world, I will continue to skip your "for rich people only" section (formerly known as Tech).

Budget-minded gamers, stay far away from this beast.

Shawn Valloric

You seem to have a selective memory—yeah, we review the cutting edge, but haven't we also recently reviewed a $1,000 rig (*GFW* #12, pg. 106) and run an article on how to build your own budget system (*GFW* #10, pg. 94)? Oh, yeah, and you'll love our Ultimate Gaming Machine competition next month!

THE FANDOM MENACE

You know what's sad? This is my first letter to the magazine ever despite the fact that I've been a loyal reader since the days of *Dune II* and *WarCraft II: Tides of Darkness* (heck, I've even looked up the magazine's Wikipedia entry). So, why now? I've got so many things that I'd like to say, but after playing *Counter-Strike: Source* recently, I concluded that the *CS Beta 4* was far superior. The graphics got better, but now the game is 1.5GB instead of 40MB, and it's not worth wasting your time. The million-plus *CS: Source* players would probably disagree with me, but here's what I've been wondering: Here I am, a professional "adult" in the work force for about four years now. Maybe games haven't changed so much. Maybe it's me that's changed. Maybe a marriage, a mortgage, a long commute, a government cubicle, and the process of becoming a soulless adult have all conspired to take away that childish wonder I had when I first made it to the Xen level in *Half-Life*. Or when I sat in church designing *WarCraft II* maps on the back of the bulletin or dreamed up the ultimate weapon-versus-heatsink configuration in *MechWarrior 2* or got my first knife kill in *CS*.

But I'm not giving up on computer games yet. For the past decade, I've read about how PC games are dying...and they haven't died yet. *Crysis* is at the top of my Christmas list this year, and I dropped the cash for a DX10-ready card despite the fact that the $400 could've been worth millions in my 401(k) someday, had I invested it. I guess I'm not a soulless cubicle dweller after all. Maybe my priorities are still in the right place.

So to Jeff, Sean, Darren, Ryan, Shawn, and everyone else at *GFW*: keep up the great work! Also, print this letter in its entirety. When a longtime fan writes from the heart, you print his damn....

Jack Gray

WELL WISHES

My dad is dying. He has lupus (SLE); it's affecting his lungs, brain, kidneys, and heart. He also has a blood disease that goes along with it. He has lost use of his left arm and has had heart attacks and strokes. He is now on oxygen, and he is in so much pain. I can't help but cry when I see him, and my mom goes to her room to cry, because she doesn't want him to see her cry. One of the few things he still enjoys is your magazine. He has read *CGW* (now *GFW*) for as long as I can remember; he reads them until they fall apart, and then he has me tape them up and put them on the bookshelf in his room so he can read them again (well, this makes me laugh). I was just wondering if you can do something for him—this would make him a little happy.

Aaron W. S.

Aaron, we're sorry to hear what your father is going through. We may play the part of heartless bastards here in the magazine, but our thoughts go out to your whole family. And to your dad: Keep an eye on the mailbox. We've got something coming your way.

Write us at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

My parents only allow me to get PC games.
Matthew Wiles

Whatever happened to Scorpia—if that's her real name? My younger self thought she rocked!
Patrick Murphy

Tom and Bruce, why did you do it? *Armageddon Empires* is giving me headaches and nightmares, between the Xenopods and the Mutants. Why not just poison me with radiation? Great game!
Kim Schoeffel

I'M A GAMER. PERIOD.

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN MY **DREAM** TO MAKE VIDEO GAMES. THE DEGREE I'M EARNING AT DEVRY WILL DEFINITELY GIVE ME A COMPETITIVE EDGE IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY WHEN I GRADUATE. I'VE MET TONS OF GAMERS AT DEVRY... AND THE PROFESSORS REALLY KNOW THEIR STUFF. IT'S NICE TALKING TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE AS MUCH EXPERIENCE AS THEY DO. THESE DAYS, EVERYONE PLAYS SOME KIND OF GAME... BUT I'M A TRUE GAMER, 'TIL I DIE.

Freedom A. Evans, DeVry University '09
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DELAY OF

How topflight games end up in holding patterns—or stuck on the runway

TERMINALS 1, 2, 3

GAME	DEPARTURE	STATUS	PAGE
HUXLEY	2005	DELAYED	018
PLANETSIDE	2000	DELAYED	018
ALONE IN THE DARK	2004	DELAYED	020
AGE OF CONAN	2005	DELAYED	021
SAVAGE 2	2005	DELAYED	022
EMPIRE IN ARMS	2002	DELAYED	023
GODS & HEROES	2005	CANCELED	024
SIN EPISODES	2005	CANCELED	025
MYTHICA	2002	CANCELED	025
AUTO ASSAULT	2004	CANCELED	026

INSIDE

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SpinCity
Why *SimCity: Societies* teamed with energy giant BP.
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TRENDS
Gaming Green
Tips to turn your rig into a green machine.
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PREVIEW
Tomb Raider: Underworld
Lara Croft travels to Mexico...to adopt children?
38

SPECIAL REPORT

Blizzard's, Valve's, and id's ability to answer press and publishers' "When?" with "When it's done" is hard-won; unless you've launched a *WarCraft* or *Half-Life*, you don't shirk deadlines—you commit to a date and cross your fingers. The three-part series of stories spanning the next 16 pages offers the latest available information on delayed games still in development (page 18); outlines what went wrong with recent projects canceled prior to completion or terminated after botched debuts (page 24); and investigates the causes and conditions behind now-classic cases of delay and cancellation (page 28).

GAME	DEPARTURE	STATUS	PAGE
IMPERATOR	2004	CANCELED	026
WARCRAFT ADVENTURES	1997	CANCELED	028
BATTLECRUISER 3000AD	1989	DELAYED	029
DAIKATANA	1997	DELAYED	029
MIDDLE-EARTH ONLINE	1998	DELAYED	030
RISE AND FALL	2003	DELAYED	032
TEAM FORTRESS 2	1999	DELAYED	032
VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES	2004	DELAYED	033
PREY	1995	DELAYED	034
ULTIMA ONLINE 2	1999	CANCELED	035

OFF THE RADAR?

Trainmasters among you will note a few obvious omissions. Will Wright's origin-of-species sim *Spore* continues to evolve at a speed Darwinian by game-development standards. Forever-delayed *Duke Nukem Forever* is allegedly almost done (a new trailer recently returned him to top of mind). *Diablo III* visits us in dream. The developers of these titles, however, weren't ready to talk—likewise, with Arkane Studios and "cross-player" FPS *The Crossing*, and Bethesda and tactical shooter *Rogue Warrior*.

PART 1:
DELAYED GAMES STILL IN DEVELOPMENT

ONE YEAR LATE

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2005
CAUSE OF DELAY: We've got a soft spot for *Huxley*. In November 2005, this magazine (then known as *Computer Gaming World*) first previewed the genre-bending title, calling it "a case study in convergence—splicing first-person shooting with roleplaying, and Epic's Unreal Engine 3 with Webzen's own networking code," and anticipated playing in its urban wasteland the following year. Well, it's 2008. And we're still excited, not for anything we've actually seen of the Korean project, but rather for what *Huxley* wants to be.

What it wants to be is a proper FPS with a truly persistent, enduring, and meaningful multiplayer experience. This is a noble and worthy goal.

Reakktor's postapocalyptic suburban warfare game *Neocron* is arguably the best attempt at the subgenre. Sony Online Entertainment's *PlanetSide*, a not-dead-yet, once-promising, apocalypse-agnostic rural warfare game, is the second runner-up. Both *Neocron* and *PlanetSide* did great things at their peaks, but ultimately, the former wasn't enough of an FPS, and the latter wasn't enough of an MMO. So when *Huxley* producer Ki Jong "K.J." Kang says we're in for "fun and exciting battles with results that will truly affect character growth and development," we really, really want to believe him, no matter how much he sounds like a marketer.

Huxley is the child of odd parents. The game traces its roots back to 2004, when Webzen (known at the time only for their Asian MMO *Mu*) acquired South Korean developer Delphiey, itself known only for *Nitro Family*, a destined-for-the-budget-bin first-person shooter built from *Serious Sam*'s Serious engine. It was impossible not to be skeptical. But by 2005, Webzen had enough concept art and bullet points on PowerPoint slides to win "Best Online Game" at that year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (proving that reading the entrails of chickens is an optimistic and still-living art).

The buzz from that first E3 may have died down, but expectations haven't. *Huxley* continues to make huge—and hubristic—promises. Some of those promises: The game is a visually spectacular FPS, because it uses the Unreal Engine 3 that powers the oh-so-pretty *Gears of War* and *BioShock*. It will have rock-solid net code because it leverages the bones of Webzen's popular Asian MMOs *Mu* and *Soul of the Ultimate Nation*. It should feature massive player-vs.-player battles

PUBLISHER: Webzen DEVELOPER: Webzen PLATFORM: PC

HUXLEY

Community, identity, stability

TOO MUCH, TOO SOON

Huxley wasn't the first attempt at making a first-person shooter massive. In another story of agonizing delay, Sony Online Entertainment, flush with cash from the success of *EverQuest*, announced *PlanetSide* in 2000. Originally scheduled for a 2001 release, the game's launch ultimately slipped to mid-2003. At the time, *PlanetSide* had a sliced-bread position in the market. It was the only place you could find 50 to 100 people fighting over the same objectives. Battles would ebb and flow across continents, and with a full server and a good squad, an evening playing *PlanetSide* could be truly glorious.

Over time, *PlanetSide* simply evaporated. Newer FPS titles like *Half-Life 2* and *Unreal Tournament 2004* raised the bar on how first-person shooters look and feel, and just as server populations dwindled, Sony kept launching expansions making the world bigger and the battles more complex. *PlanetSide* began to feel like a wasteland where you spent most of your time trying to find a fight, and once there, you were unsure what to do.

Were Sony to launch the game in 2008 with a new graphics engine, a new marketing campaign, and a little work on the gameplay, it would probably land with a bang, not a thud. Instead, it's a bit lonely on the *PlanetSide* servers, but a stubborn few still keep up the fight.

HUXLEY. BEFORE ALL ELSE, IS A KOREAN GAME.

on servers that can hold 5,000 players at a time. It ought to provide a rich science fiction role playing experience. As Kang puts it, "It's an FPS. It's an MMO. It's an RPG." And it's aiming to do all of these things well.

That the game's been delayed roughly two years since its press debut is both understandable and unsurprising. *Huxley* is trying to marry two very different genres, and thus, two very different kinds of development. "Forming a hundred creative developers into a coherent development group was the most difficult objective," Kang recalls. Over the project's lifetime, Kang's tried different development methods, finally settling on a division of labor that's kept the process moving forward efficiently. The organizational challenge stems from bringing together two schizophrenic technologies: Unreal Engine 3's first-person shooter prowess and Webzen's in-house engine for large-scale MMOs.

UPDATED ITINERARY/LATEST INFO: "Developing *Huxley* as an MMO game based on the Unreal Engine, instead of our own engine technology, was a pretty challenging process," Kang admits. "Early [on], we tried focusing more on the MMO aspects and less on the FPS elements." After all, they already knew how to make an MMO. But the focus on stories and battles that swept across vast landscapes proved to be a step too far. "We realized that if we just focused on massive battlefields, gamers missed the hyper-action elements made famous by *Unreal* and *Quake*." So the pendulum swung the other way, and it appears that getting the shooter part right dominated Webzen's focus as development entered beta. Bootlegged gameplay footage from a closed beta weekend conducted in Korea shows graphically interesting, fluid, and generally serviceable FPS bones. The MMO stuff seems to be slipping a bit further into the background. "Though we have character customization, clan support, items, trading, and other MMO features," explains Kang, "the real core of the game is *Huxley*'s massive battle system."

WORTH THE WAIT?: If pulling off the FPS/MMO/RPG trifecta isn't hard enough, Webzen's got a few additional hurdles to jump. Perhaps most problematic: From the beginning, *Huxley* was headed to both PC and Xbox 360. Exactly how the two platforms will interact in the virtual world remains to be seen, but Webzen promises some sort of interaction, if not full-on parity, between platforms. But at launch, it won't matter, since the 360 version arrives later. Kang's reasoning for this decision makes us a little nervous. "If we're able to stabilize and optimize all the elements for the PC version, then the Xbox 360 version of *Huxley* will be much easier to create." This sounds suspiciously like "After we get it patched up, we'll make the console version."

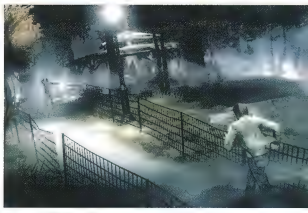
And then there's the international component. *Huxley* is, before all else, a Korean game. It's being beta-tested in Korea. It's set to launch in Korea. When it's up and running there, Webzen plans to port the game to the U.S.—and eventually, China (where Webzen reportedly sold rights to China's largest publisher, The9, for a cool $35 million). This development pattern isn't without precedent—teen hit *MapleStory* made the same jump, and South Korean publisher NCSoft has a string of solid titles (*Lineage*, *Guild Wars*, *City of Heroes*) that crossed the Pacific in one way or another. Still, Webzen has yet to penetrate the U.S. market.

It all boils down to an identity crisis. We're not sure even *Huxley* knows what it wants to be when it grows up. But that doesn't mean we're not dying to find out. Reading the entrails one more time, it looks like we don't have too long to wait before we can judge for ourselves. The game is currently in its second closed beta test in Korea.

ESTIMATED ARRIVAL TIME: 2008

Julian Murdoch

Cross-platform play is no longer likely.



Play via first- or third-person perspective: The former allows you to watch for injuries, which appear on Carnby's body, while the latter is arguably more immersive.

ALONE AT LAST?

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2004

CAUSE OF DELAY: *Alone in the Dark* went back to the drawing board when next-gen became now. "We first proposed the project along with a lot of preproduction work in 2004," producer Nour Polloni says of the fifth installment in the French-made (and first-ever) survival-horror series. "At the time, [our publisher] thought the idea was overly ambitious and killed it. We still believed in the concept and so created a demo to prove that it could work; we presented it in the summer of 2005 and got the green light."

Difficulties didn't end there, though. Microsoft launched its Xbox 360 console that November; Sony's PlayStation 3 followed suit in 2006; and new GPUs gave PC graphics parity. "Originally," Polloni says, "Eden [Games] developed the game on an existing rendering engine. We soon realized that this solution wouldn't support the real-time lighting and photographic effects we wanted, and so we completely reworked it, which essentially meant rebuilding the entire game to match."

Polloni attributes subsequent snags to increasingly complex game design: "The more innovation and new technology you put into a game, the more problems you're making for yourself." And *[Alone in the Dark's]* size and scope and degree of gameplay innovation take time to develop. Each new idea in the game is almost enough to make a game in its own right."

Whether or not critics and consumers agree, of course, remains to be decided.

UPDATED ITINERARY/LATEST INFO: Man-eating, oil-like muck coats protagonist Edward Carnby's world (NYC's Central Park and its surroundings)—light and heat beat it back. In the section I saw, associate producer Todd Slepian set wood scraps aflame, both forcing the ooze to writhe away and demonstrating the danger of infernos in a game where fire dynamically consumes combustible material. A flashlight works as well, as long as you find fresh batteries in your jacket—a veritable hardware store in black leather that Slepian stocks with duct tape, aerosol cans, bandages, and bottles of liquid fuel. These are *Alone in the Dark's* answer to MMORPG crafting items, where MacGyver-esque combos create makeshift ammo, such as when Carnby wraps a chemical jug in two-sided tape, sticks it to a critter, and shoots it.

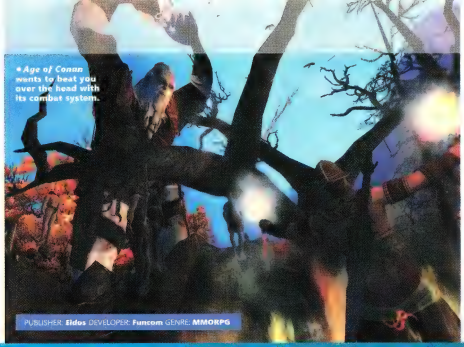
WORTH THE WAIT?: Watching Slepian skip around—using a stick to shove an electric cable out of sewage water he wants to cross; driving from Eighth Ave. to Central Park North to Fifth Ave. as the city collapses around him in a demonic earthquake—it's tough to tell how it all fits together and whether or not the narrative works or is H.P. Lovecraft lite. In addition, technically troubled A.I. and animations lead me to question the likelihood of Eden meeting the March launch that Slepian quotes. Two days later, I learn that Atari is delaying the game again—this time until September. Fitting, no?

ESTIMATED ARRIVAL TIME: September 2008

Shawn Elliott

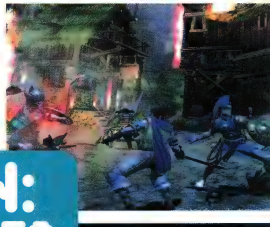
ALONE IN THE DARK

Something wicked this way comes...eventually



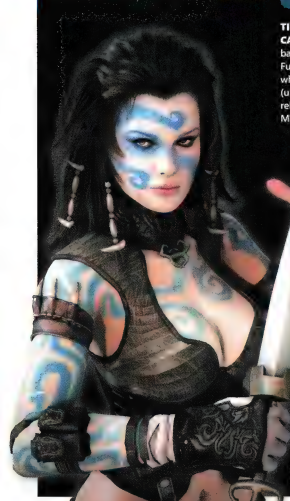
• *Age of Conan* wants to beat you over the head with its combat system.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Funcom** GENRE: **MMORPG**



AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

Easing into the pain



COMBAT TRAINING

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2005

CAUSE OF DELAY: "Something big changed back in 2004 called *World of WarCraft*," says Funcom product director Jørgen Tharaldsen, whose *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (unveiled in April 2005 and originally set for release in the first half of 2006) promises MMORPG combat that'll appeal to "twitch" gamers, too. "[At that point], we had been in development more than one and a half years, and that changed everything in terms of scope. That's the bar of the market these days."

UPDATED ITINERARY/ LATEST INFO: Perhaps recognizing *World of WarCraft*'s famed "ease of entry" (its player base seems as diverse as the Wii's—everyone has a friend whose grandma ganks noobs, and she's probably in your guild), Tharaldsen and company went back to the drawing board to retool the beginning of their game and tear down what they perceived as entry barriers to the game's combat system. Unlike many MMOs, which tend to offer a single autoattack option for simple melee combat (class-specific skills notwithstanding), *AOC* gives every player a left, right, and overhead blow. Opponents, in turn, can dynamically stack their defenses on any of those three sides, so even the most straightforward combat requires constant attention. "Press 1, watch *Oprah*" just won't work.

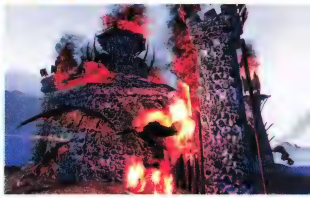
"It would have been the death of us if we changed the vision seven months before launch," says Tharaldsen, hammering home that, while the way you're introduced to the combat system has gone through major rework, the actual system itself hasn't. "We've spent four years honing the vision instead of going, 'Oh, s***—maybe we should do this instead of that.' As you get into the system, as you get into the levels, you say, 'Oh, I've got this feat now. It's like in [realistic PlayStation driving sim] *Gran Turismo*, where the car brakes for you before you go into a turn—that's how it's set up when you start the game now. And as you get more active, you can [turn] off the autotargeting, the autofacing."

WORTH THE WAIT?: For many classes, *AOC*'s tactical gambit may affect the beginning of the game more than the later bits—any endgame *WOW* raider with 4 rows of fully loaded action bars will tell you the autoattack button's the least of his worries. As a level 1 Bear Shaman (*AOC*-speak for "warrior-priest"), I smacked plenty of foes with my staff and found the combat immediately engaging (if not nearly as taxing as *Street Fighter II*, which Funcom cites as a gameplay target); but in a group dungeon at level 20, I spent most of my time using traditional back-of-the-line nuking, healing, and buffing skills. Which leads me to wonder: Are *Conan*'s three melee combat options really any different from the cue-reaction mechanics of other MMO skills? (See an opponent blocking from the left? Press 3 to hit from the right. See an opponent casting a fire spell? Press 6 to cast silence and cancel.) I suspect it's all in the presentation.

ESTIMATED ARRIVAL TIME: March 25, 2008

• **Sean Molloy**

Spawn in as one of 10 full classes or four "siege weapons."



THINK SMALL

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2005

CAUSE OF DELAY: "One of the things that really hit *Savage 1* hard was the fact that it was kind of rushed out the door," says Marc DeForest, who wears enough hats for a hydra. He's cofounder and president of developer S2 Games, lead designer of *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*—and then some. "In my opinion, *Savage 2*, outside of this other [action-RPG] project that we have, is our last shot...so we've gotta do it well. It's a fairly common thing in the business of videogames that games don't come out on time. So I thought we were all right and it was worth the risk."

DeForest's "when it's done" attitude is the sort usually afforded only to juggernauts like Blizzard, Valve, or id Software, developers that have proved their potency and can pretty much guarantee a payoff. But S2 Games' position stems mainly from their plans to distribute *Savage 2* digitally (i.e., without publishers or fourth-quarter earnings reports breathing down S2's neck)—and that DeForest is more or less funding the project out of his own pocket. The limit, then, is just how deep he's willing to dip in.

"We're making a new engine," says DeForest (who admits to thinking the game's been "three or four months away" from release for more than a year), "and this is really where I think a huge portion of the [delay] resides." DeForest estimates 11 of S2 Games' two-dozen employees are on *Savage 2*. "Obviously, for being such a small team, to write an engine from scratch is pretty impressive. But it's really hard to determine how long something's gonna take when you only have a couple sets of eyes looking at it."

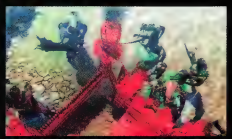
UPDATED ITINERARY/LATEST INFO: We last saw a raw *Savage 2* almost a full year ago, and the beta looks and sounds a lot like the skeleton advertised back then: an ambitious mashup of melee combat, first-person shooting, roleplaying, and real-time strategy. Think *WarCraft*, with individual players as the units (base-building peons included, though S2's have teeth), complete with stats, items, and leveling up. One player takes the role of "commander," directing where other players should go. Think, also, *Team Fortress* and its ilk, as five classes of Men oppose five classes of Beast, each with eight or so distinct powers. Think next of the balancing nightmare, though DeForest says *Savage 2* has undergone only minor design changes, stemming from feedback from the company's extremely intimate beta.

"The movement speed of players has been drastically changed," DeForest says. "It's slower, more deliberate—we got feedback that perhaps the battles were a little too chaotic." Melee combat once consisted of three moves: Strong Attack, Quick Attack, and Block, each trumping another in rock-paper-scissors style. "But it was somewhat cumbersome. The simple change of replacing Strong Attack with an ability called Interrupt [to break Block] was huge. We're also redoing all the animations and slowing the melee down about 35 percent right now, so it's even more deliberate. The last thing we want is for new people to jump in and go, 'Oh, my god—there's people flying everywhere! I don't even know what's going on!'"

WORTH THE WAIT?: Few multiplayer games have the tactical complexity of *Savage 2*—for that reason alone, it'll no doubt earn a hardcore bunch of fans and clans. We suspect it'll work best for those able to reconcile the difference between "really impressive for a team of 11 guys" and "really impressive next to *Team Fortress 2*."

ESTIMATED ARRIVAL TIME: January 16, 2008

Sean Molloy



Each team can elect a commander to direct players with beams of light from the sky.

PUBLISHER: **S2 Games** DEVELOPER: **S2 Games** GENRE: **Multiplayer Action/Strategy**

SAVAGE 2

Time moves differently in the garage

Tom vs. Bruce fans won't find this caption funny.

SIX YEARS IN THE MAKING

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2002

CAUSE OF DELAY: Dissatisfaction and a small design team delayed this adaptation of the classic tabletop game, a complex and sprawling strategy epic set in Napoleonic Europe. It's one tiny megalomaniac against the world.

Marshall Ellis, the lead developer of the computer version, says: "In late 2004, it became clear that we should not release this game. Keep in mind that we had a game to release but it was not a good port of *Empires in Arms*. Matrix [the publisher] and I decided to take the hit on the short-term expense."

As the tabletop game evolved, so did the computer translation. The *Empires in Harm* variant of the board game grew more popular, so Matrix brought the designer onboard. Since a niche title can't fall back on mainstream acceptance, Ellis has spent the last few years working in fan suggestions and problems the game testers faced. Otherwise, "we would not have satisfied the *EIA* following. Maybe I should have waited until I was independently wealthy so that I could spend more time coding."

And Ellis did all the programming on his own. "Since I was the only coder in this game, it was essential that I maximize coding time and not get caught up in sounds and graphics." Matrix Games provided help with those parts of the game so Ellis could focus his energies.

Ellis emphasizes that only independent publishers like Matrix can afford to be this patient with part-time programmers. Small teams and small budgets can extend the timeline since there are fewer resources and, usually, less at stake.

UPDATED ITINERARY/LATEST INFO: Ellis punctuated months of silence about a new release date with occasional gameplay reports. Fans got a chance to see how things would work onscreen and got a good look at the interface. Then, surprising many, *Empires in Arms* was finally released in early December.

WORTH THE WAIT?: This is as faithful a translation of a complicated strategy classic as you will find anywhere, but it's very much a game for people who loved the cardboard original. The A.I. is passable for training purposes, but the idea is to find five human opponents to play.

ARRIVAL TIME: December 2007

Troy S. Goodfellow

Matrix Games | Marshall Ellis | Turn-Based Strategy

EMPIRES IN ARMS

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PART 2:
RECENTLY CANCELED

You will never fight this creature in *Gods & Heroes*. Good thing you fought it in *EverQuest* and *World of WarCraft* and *Vanguard* and...

PENDING LITIGATION

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2005
CAUSE OF CANCELLATION: As early as December 2006, the writing was on the wall for Perpetual Entertainment's mythology-inspired massively multiplayer online RPG *Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising*. A round of layoffs during 2006's holiday season (company cochairman and president Chris McKibbin qualified this on the game's official forum as a normal and necessary step, as *Gods & Heroes* was "within a month of being content complete") provided the first sign of trouble.

Development on *Gods & Heroes* and Perpetual's sophomore project, *Star Trek Online*, trucked along until October 9, 2007, when McKibbin informed the game's fans (again, via the official website) that *Gods & Heroes* was on "indefinite hold" in favor of redistributing labor toward the (presumably) much more lucrative *Star Trek* MMO license. Essentially, *Gods & Heroes* fell victim to an unfortunate yet reasonable business decision for a fledgling developer faced with financial choices and opportunities.

But here's where it gets interesting.

San Francisco, CA–based public relations agency Kohnke Communications—which entered into a contractual relationship with Perpetual in April 2007 and has acted as the developer's PR arm since—filed a formal breach-of-contract complaint to the San Francisco Superior Court on December 7, 2007. The 12-page complaint alleges, in all its legal-jargony glory, that Perpetual willfully intended to defraud Kohnke and other creditors. Perpetual publicly declared bankruptcy and claimed to have liquidated its assets (including all *Star Trek Online* resources) on October 10; Kohnke's complaint claims corporate shenanigans, stating that Perpetual CEO Joseph Keene failed to inform Kohnke of any financial turmoil ahead of time and "admitted that...Perpetual transferred certain assets to [newly formed corporation] P2...[including] assets related to *Star Trek Online*."

The complaint goes on to assert that "On information and belief, Perpetual Entertainment received less than market value for the assets it transferred to P2, and the transfer made Perpetual insolvent (or worsened Perpetual's existing insolvency)." In plain English: Kohnke accuses Perpetual of transferring all valuable assets to a different corporation in an effort to bankrupt Perpetual itself and dodge outstanding debt.

The possible restitution that Perpetual faces if they're found guilty in court? Something to the tune of $80,000 to $290,000. As of this story, neither Kohnke nor Perpetual would comment further on these affairs due to pending litigation.

Curiously, representatives from *Gods & Heroes* publisher Sony Online Entertainment flatly denied to offer any input whatsoever, simply indicating that SOE had "stopped commenting on that game" once Kohnke began handling its PR. Bonus points for stepping away from this particular disaster, guys! ● **Ryan Scott**

Sony Online Entertainment | Perpetual Entertainment | MMORPG

GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

Lawyers & zeros

STILLBORN SAGA

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2005

CAUSE OF CANCELLATION: Experiments with episodic content have been, at best, intermittently successful. With the wide adoption of broadband technology, episodic content was supposed to unlock the potential for developers to build serialized stories on predictable schedules by using services like Valve's Steam to quickly deliver new content. Ritual Entertainment's *SiN Episodes* was a prime candidate to lead the way.

Instead, in spring 2006 Ritual managed to release just the first episode (*SiN Episodes: Emergence*) out of the nine planned before casual-games publisher MumboJumbo acquired them in early 2007. The cancellation of *SiN Episodes* has never been confirmed, but the likelihood of engaging in rampant gunplay in Freeport City again seems dubious at best.

PUBLISHER: **Steam** DEVELOPER: **Ritual Entertainment** GENRE: **First Person Shooter**

Emergence (a sort-of sequel to 1998's *Quake II*–powered *SiN*) takes place four years after the events of *SiN* and revisits the previously established conflict between HardCorps commander John Blade and SiNTEK's buxom and promiscuous CEO, Elexis Sinclaire, and her genetic mutation escapades. Among the features that Ritual touted most was the ability to track player statistics and develop future episodes from that information. Unfortunately, the feedback that decided the future of *SiN Episodes* didn't come from its gameplay—it came from point of sale.

An early 2007 interview at Ritual fansite Ritualistic (www.ritualistic.com) offers the best guess about what led to the apparent end: The studio underestimated the cost of producing the first episode, and the game did not sell well enough to allow Ritual to continue self-funding the project. When the money ran dry, the project stopped, and Ritual shopped for investors.

The search led Ritual to MumboJumbo, publisher of the *Luxor* series, which former Ritual CEO Ron Dimant founded in 2001. Since the acquisition and a brief "maybe" from the two in response to inquiries about pursuing the *SiN* storyline, MumboJumbo has focused its attention squarely on the burgeoning casual games market. While Ritual may revisit the *SiN* franchise at some point, it's unlikely to be in the form of episodes two through nine.

●**Sean Sands**

SIN EPISODES

Episodic nonexistence

ONE MMO TOO MANY

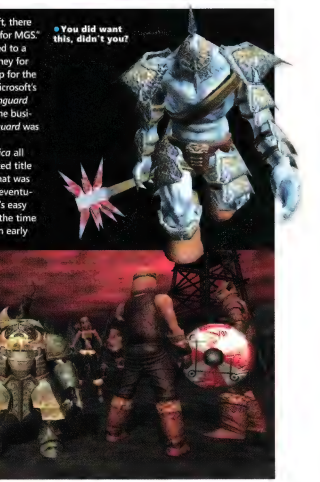
ORIGINAL ETA: 2004

CAUSE OF CANCELLATION: *Mythica* suffered no significant turmoil, no dramatic mismanagement, no notably bad decision-making. In fact, right up to the sudden and bitter end, everything seemed to be progressing smoothly. And then, Microsoft canceled the MMO.

Based on Norse mythology, *Mythica* would have put players into the role of a fallen hero seeking to prevent Ragnarok, the final battle of the gods and the end of the world. But a confluence of events eventually put the game in a fight for backing against *Vanguard*, and Microsoft let the game slip quietly away.

"I'd have to say that one of the things that precipitated Microsoft Games Studios' review of its MMO portfolio was the departure of vice president Ed Fries," says Chris Lye, a former global product manager at Microsoft during *Mythica*'s development. "Ed loves MMOs and understands the importance of the genre. When he left, there was no one to champion an MMO vision for MGS." The changing of the guard at Microsoft led to a lot more attention, and by extension, money for its console division, which was ramping up for the launch of the Xbox 360. And suddenly, Microsoft's production of two expensive MMOs—*Vanguard* and *Mythica*—raised red flags. "After all the business analysis, someone decided that *Vanguard* was the safer bet, and *Mythica* got the ax."

In a way, this makes the story of *Mythica* all the more tragic. It was a highly anticipated title with a unique setting and clever ideas that was canceled in favor of a game that would eventually suffer its own very public turmoil. It's easy enough to judge the decisions made at the time from the comfy chair of hindsight, but in early 2004, there was good reason to think that an *EverQuest*–inspired, traditional fantasy MMO was the safer bet. ●**Sean Sands**



PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Microsoft Game Studios** GENRE: **MMORPG**

MYTHICA

For want of a champion

WRECKED!

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2004
CAUSE OF CANCELLATION: *Auto Assault* is what happens when *Mad Max* meets *Interstate 76* for a party at *EverQuest's* house. Its setting was a postapocalyptic future where an elite group of humans, in an effort to stymie an alien plague, destroys the planet's surface in the ultimate scorched-earth endeavor. Unfortunately for everyone, the plan fails and the Mutants and Biomeks that evolve from the double whammy of alien infection and nuclear apocalypse become two of the prongs in a three-way conflict played out in heavily armored vehicles on Earth's irradiated surface. The compelling premise fell on deaf ears when the game launched in 2006, and *AA* struggled to develop a profitable following.

But according to Scott Brown, president of *Auto Assault* developer NetDevil, this is still a story about what happens in the development phase: "The problem isn't slipping late. The problem is not slipping early."

Brown reasons that the foundation for success for any MMO is built while the team is still small. The key is ensuring that the underlying gameplay is actually fun. "When you're playing this prototype and you're just running around in the core gameplay, that's when you need to slip. And that's when we didn't."

Brown is forthcoming about *Auto Assault* missing the mark with a camera that never managed to show off its high-end visuals, offering what he describes as the "worst of both worlds." He's also quick to point out that the game offered a compelling solo experience and some technical wizardry by bringing Havok-based physics into an MMO environment.

NetDevil is taking the lessons learned from *Auto Assault* and moving forward with a significant update to the quietly successful *Jumpgate*, called *Jumpgate: Evolution*, as well as the curious MMO title *Lego Universe*. Scott is clear about what they learned from *Auto Assault*. "Make it incredibly fun first, then worry about producing all the content, because then what you do is produce really fun content." ● **Sean Sands**

AUTO ASSAULT

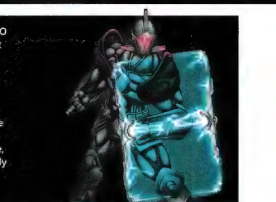
Uninsured driver

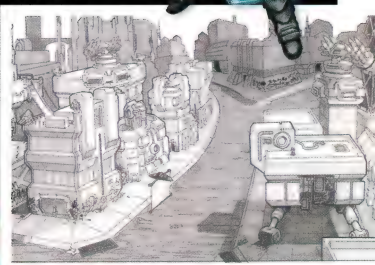
SUBSTANDARD

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2004
CAUSE OF DELAY: When he announced the postponement of *Imperator*, Mythic Entertainment president Mark Jacobs was refreshingly candid: The game simply wasn't good enough. The *Dark Age of Camelot* developer (which Electronic Arts later acquired and renamed EA Mythic) had been working on their Roman-themed, sci-fi MMO—originally slated for 2006 release—for three years when the studio decided to end the project.

Imperator's conceit centered around an alternative history in which the Roman Empire never fell, paving the way for a galactic Pax Romana where peace and Doric architecture reigned for thousands of years. By changing one key event in the history of the Roman Empire and imagining its results, Mythic planned to topple a wildly imaginative new set of dominoes in recasting the political landscape of the world, leading to a future where Romans fight technologically advanced Mayans in interplanetary warfare. It was an ambitious backstory that set the foundation for what previews described as fairly typical MMO play, though *Imperator's* makers planned to start players off as more than mere vermin killers. (Microsoft's *Mythica* shared this concept.)

Imperator's developer eventually took notice of Microsoft's game and filed a lawsuit for trademark infringement in late 2003 over the use of the name *Mythica* and its uncomfortable similarity to "Mythic Entertainment." The issue became moot once Microsoft canceled the title, and the whole ordeal was settled quietly in early 2004. Development of *Imperator* continued for another year and a half, but a cool reception at E3 2005 and Mythic's securing of the highly desirable Games Workshop license to produce a *Warhammer* MMO led to a July postponement, highlighting a common theme of our feature: Companies don't like working on more than one MMO at a time. ● **Sean Sands**





● *"Dark Age of Camelot* set the standard," says Mythic president Mark Jacobs. *"Imperator* was simply not meeting that standard."

IMPERATOR

Fallen empire

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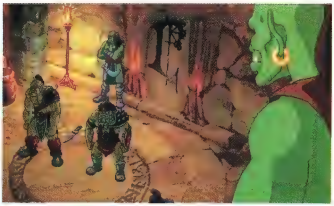
PART 3:

CLASSIC CASES OF DELAY & CANCELLATION



"Rise up, Orclings! We look like a bad Saturday morning cartoon!"

UNSALVAGEABLE

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1997
TIME OF ARRIVAL: Never
CAUSE OF DELAY: *WarCraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans* is one of PC gaming's Great Lost Games, a holy grail to Blizzard geeks, a phantom of a game made 10 years ago, nearly completed, but yanked away from fans at the last second like Lucy with Charlie Brown's football.

Blizzard announced *WarCraft Adventures* in March 1997, and it was to be a complete departure from the strategy games that had made them famous. Described in the original press release as "the pivotal next chapter in the epic *WarCraft* saga," it was to take place immediately after the events of *WarCraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal*, but would, surprisingly, be an adventure game. (Or maybe not so surprisingly, given how story-driven the *WarCraft* universe has always been.) It was intended to be and was in fact designed as a classic, old-school, point-and-click 2D adventure game, modeled after the old LucasArts and Sierra games, with hand-drawn, cel-animated art, fully animated sequences, and a focus on traditional puzzle- and dialogue-based gameplay. The plot? The origin story of the Orc named Thrall, raised in human captivity after his parents were killed during the events of *WarCraft II*, who would grow up to unite the Orcs in Azeroth and lead them in rebellion against the humans.

Unfortunately, production on *WarCraft Adventures* was difficult from the start. Rather than design the game in-house, Blizzard contracted a St. Petersburg-based Russian developer, Animation Magic, to do the bulk of the production work, including all the animation, artwork, and coding. (The storyline and overall direction still came from Blizzard.) Given that this was the Stone Age for the Internet, however, collaboration and communication were slow and difficult, and the delays were constant. After one year of development, with all of the locations designed, puzzles crafted, voice acting (including the ubiquitous Clancy Brown as Thrall) recorded, and animation completed, Blizzard was still fundamentally unsatisfied with the game and pushed the original release date of December 1997 out a full year so they could reassess.

At this point, Blizzard brought in famed adventure-game designer Steve Meretzky, known for his acclaimed work on old Infocom adventures like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Planetfall*, as a kind of "script doctor," to help the team tweak the puzzles and gameplay. Meretzky spent the next couple weeks looking at the game, after which it was decided that Blizzard would need even more time beyond the December 1998 scheduled release.

But it was not to be. Blizzard had fundamentally lost faith in the title, made even worse by both the impending release of LucasArts' *The Curse of Monkey Island* and just-announced *Grim Fandango*—which they felt were going to make their own game look bad. Notoriously competitive and critical of their own work, Blizzard simply felt that they had a subpar product at this point, and so, just days before the E3 convention, officially canceled the game for good. Blizzard fans being Blizzard fans, an online petition circulated at once, "demanding" that the game not be canceled, which compelled Blizzard to issue a press release on May 22, 1998 restating that the game really, truly was dead.

In the grand scheme of things, however, *Lord of the Clans* lived on. Blizzard took the Thrall storyline and turned it into a novel (called *Lord of the Clans*), while Thrall and many of the story's other characters and locations eventually made their way into *WarCraft III and WOW*. Still, *WarCraft Adventures* is out there somewhere, on someone's hard disk, almost complete, just waiting to be played. If we start another petition now, maybe they'll listen this time. Get your torches and pitchforks! ● **Jeff Green**

Blizzard | Blizzard/Animation Magic | Adventure

WARCRAFT ADVENTURES

One big orc tease for frustrated *WarCraft* fanboys

SEVEN-YEAR STALL

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1989
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 1996
CAUSE OF DELAY: No discussion of delays, cancellations, miscues, and botched releases would be complete without at least mentioning—dare we say invoking—*Battlecruiser 3000AD* and its creator, Derek Smart.

Knowing little to nothing about actually making games, Smart concocted his idea for a space combat simulator in 1989. His fledgling project began a series of failed deals with publishers starting in 1992, with Take-Two Interactive finally agreeing to take the game on for seeps in 1995.

For four years, Battlecruiser and its auteur took the title of "most hyped game ever" a challenging task even in the early '90s.

And while *Duke Nukem Forever* will likely go down in history as having the longest sustained vaporlock in gaming history, nobody will come close to the hubris of *Battlecruiser*'s marketing campaign.

It started with press releases and e-mail communications from Smart that always ended with the promise "*Battlecruiser 3000AD*. The last thing you will ever desire." But that was just the setup. Countless articles featured Smart discussing the "neural network" that would be in his nascent A.I. system, the depth of the universe he was creating, the breakthrough graphics, and the unprecedented freedom of gameplay. So entranced was the gaming media that *Battlecruiser* was the cover story on most of the gaming magazines of the day (including this one back when we were *Computer Gaming World* in 1994). When the game was finally released, the ad campaign was based entirely on the premise that "gamers like boobies" and featured British pinup model Jo Guest wearing thigh-high black leather high-heeled boots and clutching the box for Derek Smart's opus between her legs. The text assured us that "she REALLY wants it."

Smart and his publisher had a falling-out before the game's release. Take-Two put out a horrible, undocumented pile of nearly random code in 1996 in a box with *Battlecruiser* printed on it, which Smart disavowed and later sued over. *CGW* gave it one star out of five.

Smart's near-constant presence in Internet flame wars throughout the decade became a thing of legend, often drowning out any discussion of the merits or faults of his games. He retrieved the game's rights from Take-Two and republished it for free on the Internet. ● **Julian Murdoch**

PUBLISHER: **Take-Two** DEVELOPER: **Derek Smart** GENRE: **Space Combat**

BATTLECRUISER 3000AD

Light-years away

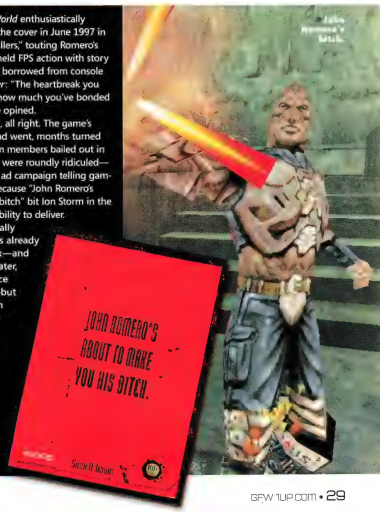
S***STORM

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1997
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2000
CAUSE OF DELAY: Poster child for development gone wrong—has any game (well, other than *Duke Nukem Forever*) suffered such ignominy for so many years? Poor *Daikatana*. But PC gaming's most notorious failure earned that status all by itself, thanks to the incredible hubris of now-defunct Ion Storm, who through a series of missteps, delays, and the most obnoxious marketing campaign ever practically begged gamers to hate it before it even came out, which for awhile seemed like would never happen. And when it did finally come out, three years overdue, it was worse than bad. It was utterly forgettable.

But it didn't start out this way. No, when *Daikatana* first burst onto the scene in 1997, everyone was in love. Developer John Romero, flush with his success at id Software on *Doom* and *Quake*, cofounded Ion Storm with a "supergroup" of other developers under the mantra "Design is Law." We all bought into it. *Computer Gaming World* enthusiastically pimped *Daikatana* on the cover in June 1997 in a roundup of "*Quake* killers," touting Romero's ambitious attempt to meld FPS action with story and character elements borrowed from console RPGs like *Chrono Trigger*: "The heartbreak you will feel only indicates how much you've bonded with the characters," we opined.

There was heartbreak, all right. The game's 1997 ship date came and went, months turned into years of delay, team members bailed out in droves, released demos were roundly ridiculed—all the while, a boastful ad campaign telling gamers to "suck it down" because "John Romero's about to make you his bitch" bit Ion Storm in the ass because of their inability to deliver.

When *Daikatana* finally shipped in 2000, it was already assumed it would suck—and suck it did. One year later, Ion Storm's Dallas office shut down for good—but *Daikatana*'s reputation and legacy was sealed forever. ● **Jeff Green**



PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Ion Storm** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

DAIKATANA

Who sucked what down?

Gandalf looks 10 years into the future and sees his game finally completed.

SUCCESS STORY

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1998
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2007
CAUSE OF DELAY: Like Tolkien's tale itself, the story of *Middle-Earth Online* is an epic one, full of people fighting valiantly for many years against incredible odds—and emerging improbably triumphant in the end. While some other games on these pages represent the detritus of failed dreams and ambitions, *Middle-Earth Online*, which later became *The Lord of the Rings Online*, is a true success story—a game that hung on the precipice of failure for almost a decade, only to surprise everyone by not only actually shipping, but by being one of the new MMOs outside of *World of WarCraft* to actually garner both critical praise and a strong player community. To put it in perspective, the game was first announced before Peter Jackson's film trilogy had even begun production, but it was not completed until all three movies were already out on DVD. To put it in even greater perspective, the original FAQ for the game assured that it "should play fine on a 28.8 modem."

Middle-Earth Online was first announced in 1998 around the time of the Game Developers' Conference as a project coming from Sierra On-Line out of their Yosemite Entertainment branch in Oakhurst, California. At the time of the announcement, they had exactly two pieces of art: a logo and a map. The idea first materialized in 1997 after Sierra began to achieve modest success with 1996's *The Realm*, one of the first successful massively multiplayer online games (before the genre even had a name). Aware of the greater possibilities with a known franchise, they began pursuing the Tolkien license, winning the rights in December 1997.

In its earliest incarnation, *Middle-Earth Online* was conceived to be played from a 2D isometric perspective, like *Ultima Online*. But after working on the code for a number of months, the team realized they'd be better off in full 3D. Thus, the developers were forced to scrap tons of work and start over, writing a 3D engine in the process. How this ultimately would have turned out is anyone's guess, because on February 22, 1999 (a day since referred to by Sierra veterans as "Black Monday"), Sierra announced that they were shutting down a number of their divisions, including Yosemite Entertainment. *Middle-Earth Online* was not canceled outright, as a number of team members were given the option to move to Sierra's Seattle office to continue working on the project. Said a spokesperson at the time, "There is one thing that I'm sure of: This development will most likely delay *Middle-Earth* for at least six months and maybe even longer."

It turned out to be a little longer. By spring 1999, just a few months after the remaining team members moved to Seattle, huge conflicts arose between developers and management over the direction the game should take, the net result being that everyone working on the game was laid off and the project was shut down to be "reevaluated."

For years there was no news of *Middle-Earth Online* at all, until finally, in September 2001, Vivendi Universal, now the parent company of Sierra, announced that they had secured an eight-year license to make games based on Tolkien's properties. However, that was *all* gamers knew for another two years, as the project was completely dark (and assumed to be nonexistent by many) until May 2003, when Vivendi and Turbine (then of *Asheron's Call* fame) announced that they had entered into a joint partnership to produce the game. Yet another two years went by before Turbine announced, in March 2005, that they had acquired the rights to make the game and publish it themselves.

This is the point that, at long last, after nearly eight years of false starts, dead ends, and lost jobs, the game now known as *The Lord of the Rings Online* finally began to take off. By its release in April 2007, 10 years after it was first conceived, the game that for years was a rumor at best, and a bad joke at worst, proved everyone wrong. It's a happy ending that only Sauron could hate.

Jeff Green

MIDDLE-EARTH ONLINE

Triumph of the Ring

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CATASTROPHE

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2003
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2006

CAUSE OF DELAY: *Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War* is the ironically prophetic name of the real-time strategy game from Stainless Steel Studios that began with great ambition and high hopes in 2003 but ended in chaos a mere two years later, with the developers forced to shut the studio down before they could properly finish the game.

It was a horrific end for a development house that began with great promise. Acclaimed designer Rick Goodman, flying high from his stint as lead designer on Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires*, left Ensemble to start Stainless Steel in 1998. The studio's first game, 2001's *Empire Earth*, an RTS spanning 500,000 years of human history, was a huge hit, selling over 1 million copies and spawning an expansion and two sequels—including the recently released *Empire Earth III* (none of which were made by Stainless Steel).

Goodman and company began work on *Rise & Fall* in 2003, with a planned two-year development cycle. It was their most ambitious project to date, melding their traditional RTS gameplay with a more action-oriented "hero" mode, which would allow players to briefly assume control of a single, powerful hero unit, and more reflex-based gameplay.

Everything still looked fine as late as February 2005, when Midway Games announced they would publish the game that November as part of a renewed emphasis on PC gaming. "We are ready to get back to working with Midway, a publisher who is truly committed to creating the highest-quality games in the industry," Goodman said at the time.

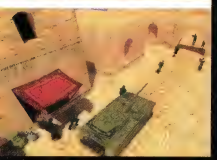
But a mere nine months later, it was all over—and due to a lawsuit between the two companies, we may never know exactly why. What we do know is that in late fall, Goodman's team was still not done with the game, so the release was pushed from October to May 2006. At this point, Midway cut off advances to Stainless Steel, and with Goodman unable to pay his team, he was forced to close the studio and hand over the unfinished game to Midway. The publisher "finished" *Rise & Fall* and shipped it in June 2006, but it was, not surprisingly, a butchered mess of Goodman's original vision.

Goodman has kept a low profile ever since, but he told *GFW* in a recent phone call that he's back in business, with a new start-up and game in the works—none of which he's talking about just yet. ● **Jeff Green**

● **Stainless Steel had ambitious plans for *Rise & Fall*. Too ambitious, it turns out, as they had to abandon the game before it was finished.**

RISE & FALL

The game that sank a company

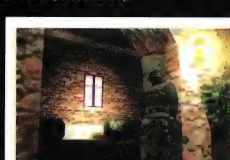


NINE YEARS IN THE MAKING

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1999
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2007

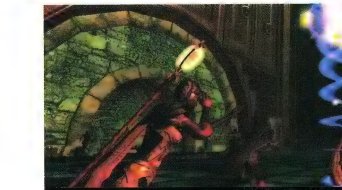
CAUSE OF DELAY: The tale of *Team Fortress 2*'s birth is a book—one that Valve wants to write, according to cocreator Robin Walker. Until then, see Walker and co. as novelists whose wastebasket material spawned a subgenre: The first *TF2* prototype that the Seattle-based studio crumpled and cast aside looked a lot like what the *Battlefield* shooter series later became. A modern war game, *Brotherhood of Arms*, as it was subtitled, promoted one player from each team to a command position and proposed parachuting as a way to enter enemy territory. In 2000, Valve delayed this splendidly animated, though stylistically lifeless iteration (see screenshots).

Released with *Half-Life 2* in 2004, the Source software-development kit (SDK) contained traces of a second *Team Fortress 2* prototype, this one seemingly set in *HL2*'s sci-fi universe. Valve cofounder Gabe Newell called this version "*Invasion*" in a 2007 GameTrailers.com interview, supporting the theory that it would chronicle the Seven-Hour War alluded to in *HL2*—and, indeed, the SDK tantalizingly told of all the Strider vehicles and various specialized weapons systems you'd want in Valve's version of *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. Unconvinced of their ability to create a commander role that would neither put too much power in the hands of a single player nor amount to mere novelty, Walker and co. presumably trashed the concept and moved on to make *Team Fortress 2* as it is today. ● **Shawn Elliott**



TEAM FORTRESS 2

Three times a charm



"Any mistakes are in the past," says senior technical architect Ryan Elam. "The future is about making the best game we can."

LUCKY TO BE ALIVE

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 2004
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2007
CAUSE OF DELAY: *Vanguard*'s development proves fact can be stranger than fiction. Conceived in 2002 as the brainchild of *EverQuest*'s cocreator Brad McQuaid, then-CEO of developer Sigil Games Online, *Vanguard* was to be Microsoft's key MMO property. Instead, *Vanguard* suffered through five years of development and tragic mismanagement and was eventually dumped by Microsoft, only to see Sony Online pick up the ramshackle pieces.

In 2001, McQuaid left *EverQuest* to explore new opportunities. Publicly, he was the guy who favored a more "hardcore" take on MMO design that emphasizes party-based combat, long travel times, death penalties, and difficult advancement—in other words, exactly the direction *EverQuest* was moving away from. In 2002, his newly formed Sigil Entertainment teamed with Microsoft to create *Vanguard*. The early days seemed amiable enough, and when Ed Fries stepped down as vice president of games publishing at Microsoft Game Studios in January of 2004, the company reevaluated its MMO strategy and backed the as-yet-unannounced *Vanguard* over *Mythica* (see page 25). The regime change at Microsoft and the shifting focus within the company to its forthcoming Xbox 360 console, however, stirred conflict.

The first cracks appeared as games like *World of WarCraft* and *EverQuest II* approached release. Sigil, seeing these games as the primary competition for their triple-A title, wanted more time and money to compete with what would become the new foundation of the genre. But Microsoft wanted the project completed and locked down for launch in summer 2006. At this point, the crystal ball darkens, and the years between 2004 and 2006 are a mishmash of conflicting reports, squabbling, finger-pointing, and backbiting—a series of long and stressful months that no one "in the know" seems interested in dwelling on. The postmortem suggests that Microsoft and Sigil became dissatisfied with one another as their visions for *Vanguard* grew increasingly disparate. So Sigil, in a desperate move to keep both their game and vision alive, bought the *Vanguard* property from Microsoft and then approached Sony Online Entertainment for funding, which, to the surprise of many, it agreed to provide.

At least one interview at f13.net described the final tense weeks leading up to *Vanguard*'s mangled launch as a feud between developers who poured their hearts into a game that seemed destined for disaster and upper management (led by McQuaid) that was stubborn at best, and absentee at worst. What seems indisputable is that no one felt the product was ready for its strictly mandated February 2007 target launch—a double-trouble release date because it also put *Vanguard* in direct competition with the *World of WarCraft* expansion released only a few weeks prior. But launch it did.

Current *Vanguard* producer Thomas Terrazas, who joined the *Vanguard* team in October 2006, says of the launch, "I can recall having the hardest time staying in-game due to hitching and performance issues. It was pretty frustrating at times, and frequently, I would log out of the game early from extreme aggravation." The reviewers agreed, detailing a game that appeared to have promise but was hampered by a game client that had not so much launched as had fallen off the launchpad.

Finally, on May 15, 2007, Sony Online bought Sigil and adopted the *Vanguard* IP as its own. That afternoon, Sigil held a meeting in its parking lot where the company's staff was fired en masse, with McQuaid notably (and perhaps typically) absent. Sony, suddenly in the midst of a continuing PR nightmare, promptly went about the business of rehiring much of *Vanguard*'s staff to continue support of the game.

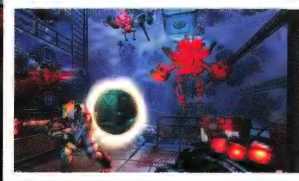
This is the part of the story where you would expect me to tell you that *Vanguard* died. But from the embers of burned bridges comes perhaps a new fire. Despite everything, *Vanguard* is actually churning along with a dedicated, if occasionally stubborn, community, a graphics engine that shines on more PCs thanks to decreasing costs of videocards, and a constant stream of bug fixes and content updates. As surprising as it may seem, the *Vanguard* team, made up almost entirely of former Sigil employees, is enthusiastic about the future of this project that has consumed them, spit them back out, and then consumed them again. ●**Sean Sands**

Sony Online Entertainment 2007 | Sigil Games Online 2006 | MMORPG

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

Blurred vision

The mid-1990s would see the formation of Ion Storm, Firaxis Games, Ritual Entertainment, Black Isle Studios, and Valve Software.



10 YEARS IN THE MAKING

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1995
TIME OF ARRIVAL: 2006
CAUSE OF DELAY: In the mid-1990s games like *Descent* and *Quake*, along with the new technology of hardware acceleration, stretched the boundaries of how computers rendered three-dimensional environments. Apogee/3D Realms, flush with success and revenue from *Duke Nukem 3D*, aspired to be the premier developer of this new breed of shooters. Project leader Tom Hall initially conceived of a game centered on a complex three-dimensional alien world where the player, armed with an integrated bio-suit, was stranded, becoming both hunter and prey. Building a state-of-the-art engine from the ground up, the *Prey* team focused on advanced 3D effects features and began talking in numerous previews about a 1997 release.

But behind the scenes, what would become an all-too-familiar conflict was brewing among *Prey*'s creative parents. In a 1996 interview with newly launched GameSpot, Hall discussed the growing tension. "I want to make fun, positive games with tons of cool characters and design innovations," Hall said. "Apogee is more about blood-spilling, over-the-top offensive action games that stick close to the tried-and-true formulas." And on August 12, 1996, Hall, who went on to cofound Ion Storm, led a mass exodus from Apogee, leaving *Prey* a shell of a game with a skeleton crew.

It was a time of game industry egos and rock-star mentalities. id Software's success at creating a cultural phenomenon from humble roots inspired a generation of idealists, perhaps the last batch for an industry ready to mature. It was a time when phrases like "tech boom," "irrational exuberance," and "Design is Law" sounded more philosophical than comical, and *Prey* was, to be fair, just one of many victims of the day.

Again, to the stubborn credit of 3D Realms, work on *Prey* not only continued with a new team, but it also escalated with the creation of a console-driven OS on which *Prey* and its tools would run. The game began to develop into a vague semblance of what would eventually be released. It now featured Native American themes, a reluctant hero, and the portal technology that would become one of the game's more daring and difficult-to-design features. But the 1996 exodus was only the first of several at 3D Realms, and despite positive buzz at 1998's Electronic Entertainment Expo, the team was in turmoil over new creative differences and technical complications. The *Prey* team again dissolved throughout the latter part of the year.

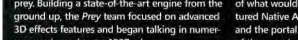
Following a halfhearted effort to ramp the game back into production, 3D Realms began to let the game quietly slip into oblivion. By early 2000 the company's website no longer mentioned *Prey*, and 3D Realms itself entered what would become a familiar media blackout on all projects. As attention turned to the next *Duke Nukem* game—and ultimately, its own troubled development—it was assumed that 3D Realms had scrapped *Prey*.

In 2005, 3D Realms and publisher 2K Games revealed that Human Head Studios had been quietly working on the title since 2001 under the direction of Chris Rhinehart, and not only was *Prey* alive and well, it was also very close to release. At E3 2005, 3D Realms and Human Head unveiled an updated trailer, now powered by the *Doom III* engine but still opening with the same voiceover script that was previously used in the 1998 trailer. *Prey* now employed gravity-bending environments, interconnected portals, the ability to enter a spirit form, and a patchwork of features finally cobbled together over 10 years of development into something like a complete game.

As improbable as it seems, *Prey* was released on July 11, 2006. After more than 10 years of development and the departure of countless employees, *Prey* earned a mostly positive critical response. Less the groundbreaking game originally conceived in 1995 and more a decent-if-traditional FPS, *Prey* can be seen as something of a metaphor for the game industry over the years since its genesis. Its own development mirrors the tumultuous adolescence of the gaming industry, as does its eventual maturation. *Prey*'s completion, achieved by conforming to now-modern standards of production, is a prime example of how much has changed in the art and business of making games since 1995.

The original 1995 description of *Prey*, as conceived by Tom Hall, shares virtually no similarities to the game finally released in 2006, save a sci-fi setting and a focus on action. Over its decade of stuttered development, the game collected and discarded gameplay concepts in much the same way that it collected and discarded whole teams of developers. And yet, unlike some of its more notorious peers, *Prey* not only launched, but it also managed to be a compelling game with complicated stages that force players to reevaluate their perception of space. As to *Prey*'s tortured decade of development, it's impossible to say whether it's a testament to 3D Realms' unapologetic stubbornness—or an indictment of it.

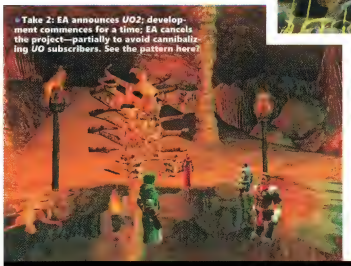
Maybe a little of both. **Sean Sands**



PREY

To oblivion and beyond

Take 1: EA announces *UO2*; development commences for a time; EA cancels the project—partially to avoid cannibalizing *UO* subscribers.



Take 2: EA announces *UO2*; development commences for a time; EA cancels the project—partially to avoid cannibalizing *UO* subscribers. See the pattern here?

GAME OVER

TIME OF DEPARTURE: 1999
TIME OF ARRIVAL: Never
CAUSE OF DELAY: As aborted sequels go, the many iterations of *Ultima Online 2* can't catch a break: Since 1999, the troubled follow-up to Origin Systems' MMORPG trailblazer *Ultima Online*'s seen no fewer than three false starts. Hardly a surprise, considering publisher EA's gun-shy attitude toward MMOs (*Motor City Online* and *Earth & Beyond* flopped)—but still undeniably embarrassing, given the *Ultima* series' historical importance to PC gaming.

Back in the golden age of *UO* and then-shiny-3D-new-kid-on-the-block *EverQuest*, publishers hadn't clued in on the customer-retention power of these strange new online games. *UO*'s 100,000-plus player base was an unprecedented success at the time, but conventional wisdom dictated that those same subscribers would fade away inside of a year. EA commissioned a sequel—aptly titled *Ultima Online 2*.

EA and Origin publicly unveiled *UO2* in September 1999, bullet-pointing a sexy 3D engine, a fantasy-meets-steampunk setting, a reduced PVP focus, and dorktastic creature designs by *Spawn* creator Todd McFarlane.

UO2 hobbled along for a good 18 months (at one point weathering an unwieldy name change to *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*—EA's awful attempt at heading off potential cannibalization of *UO* subscribers), and it finally got axed in March 2001 amidst massive layoffs, in the face of Origin's failure to meet EA's Christmas 2000 launch demands. Producer Starr Long and approximately one-third of his team defected to Destination Games (now NCsoft) to develop *Tabula Rasa* alongside longtime collaborator and *Ultima* creator Richard Garriott, while the stragglers got glommed onto *UO*'s existing content group.

Oh, and the end result of McFarlane's character designs? An unpainted pack-in figure of *Ultima* antagonist Lord Blackthorn, free with every copy of *UO* expansion *Lord Blackthorn's Revenge*.

Fast-forward to August 2003: EA announced a second *UO* sequel project, this time carrying on the numbering of the main *Ultima* RPGs (to no one's amusement, given the near-unplayable state of the universally panned *Ultima IX: Ascension*). *Ultima X: Odyssey* stuck to the usual fantasy trappings, with an emphasis on moral choices, group combat, and instanced dungeons—and paraded the Unreal engine as its hallmark feature.

Ultima X: Odyssey's development suddenly and quietly ceased in June 2004 (just months after the announcement of Origin's impending closure); an online letter from producer David Yee informed the game's fans that, "We feel that *Ultima Online* is where we need to focus our online efforts and most of my team will be moving to the *UO* expansion pack, the *UO* live team, and an unannounced *Ultima Online* project."

To sum up: History repeated itself.

Plenty of unverified reasons for *UXO*'s cancellation exist. Some accounts cite key developers' refusal to relocate from Origin's freshly scuttled Texas-based studio to EA's California offices, while others lump *UXO* in with 2004's other tragic MMO casualties (*Mythica*, *True Fantasy Live Online*, and the initial version of *Warhammer Online*), with *World of WarCraft* and *EverQuest II* looming on the horizon. The aforementioned company line is EAs only word on the matter; three years later, corporate lips remain sealed.

Speaking of silence, EA never publicly discussed the third and (so far) final *UO* sequel project, which was privately pitched to us for a possible cover story some months after *Odyssey*'s demise. We briefly disclosed this fact in the September 2005 issue of *GFW* precursor *Computer Gaming World* (#254) upon hearing insider whispers of its swift crib death. We can't say we're too surprised. **Ryan Scott**

Electronic Arts [illegible] Origin Systems, Inc. [illegible] MMORPG

ULTIMA ONLINE 2

Lightning strikes thrice

SPINCITY

How oil giant BP made *SimCity: Societies* a tool for political persuasion

We're used to the green spin of pollution-belching businesses in TV, print, and radio advertisements: SUVs saving the polar bears, industrial agriculture solving Third World hunger, coal-fired power plants humming under blue skies. But when oil giant BP (formerly British Petroleum, now the greener-sounding Beyond Petroleum) struck a deal with Electronic Arts to include global warming as one of the many city-planning challenges in *SimCity: Societies*, something new was born.

Unlike the shallow, image-polishing ads of old, BP's venture into gaming contains some real substance. Where the original *SimCity* gave players control over the simple decision of when and where to build power plants for their budding cities, *Societies* (at the behest of BP) features an array of power options, from old-fashioned coal plants and nuclear stations to newfangled solar arrays and wind farms. The purpose of such choices is to give players insight not just into the amount of climate-changing CO_2 emissions put out by different power sources but also into the cost/benefit trade-offs that come with the territory. So you might want to run your city on green power, but juice from solar arrays and wind farms is going to cost you five times as much as it would from dirty coal, straining your budget.

***SimCity: Societies*' BP-branded wind farm: environmentally-aware edutainment or pure ploy?**

The marketing in all this edutainment comes in several forms. Gas stations bear the BP name within the game, as do the various clean and renewable power sources (not the dirty stuff, of course). But the real message BP pushes is more subtle: "[We] saw that there was an issue that wasn't very well understood, that electricity is really important to [climate change]," says Carol Battershell, a VP in the company's alternative energy division. "Twice as many CO_2 emissions come from making electricity as from all forms of transportation combined. We want people to understand electricity's role in climate change better." BP, though it has a stake in solar and wind power, is primarily in the business of oil and natural gas exploration. Taking the heat off of gas-guzzling transportation and focusing it on power plants is in BP's interest.

Companies lobby consumers all the time. What's really interesting is that BP decided to promote their side of a public policy issue through game design. Apparently, the positive press that simulation and strategy games have received recently, notably from *Persuasive Games* author and game designer Ian Bogost, grabbed the attention of BP higher-ups. "We understand that there's been a fair amount of writing about how strategy games are particularly good at helping people understand these complex trade-off issues," says Battershell. "That got us to the game idea."

Bogost has long argued that games have the power to illuminate hard-to-grasp ideas. "Games are excellent tools for explaining complexity," he says. "Unlike words or images or film, games model the operation of complex systems by simulating their processes, not just by describing them." Climate change, a tangle of various human industries and the natural world, is a complex issue ripe for game treatment. But a game, even when it professes to be a simulation, can be rigged. *SimCity: Societies* overcompensates against the popular perception that SUVs cause global warming by making power plants the entire focus of the game's global warming minigame.

A cynic might be inclined to believe that BP's *SimCity* project is just another image makeover for a company with a recent spate of bad eco-press. "It's perhaps not an accident that within weeks of announcing the EA deal, BP agreed to pay over $50 million in criminal fines and plead guilty to a felony violation of the Clean Air Act in relation to a massive, fatal explosion at one of their refineries near Galveston, Texas, in 2005 and an 200,000 gallon oil spill in Alaska in 2006," says Bogost. "Does that sound like a circumstance that gives BP the right to have their name and logo associated only with 'green' energy like wind and solar power?" America's perpetual war of ideas is spreading to the interactive battlefield. Play with your elves and mages while you still can. **Robert Ashley**

GAMING GREEN

Tips to turn your gaming rig into a lean, green machine

TRENDS

Our hobby isn't so kind to the environment. With high-end graphics cards, multiple hard drives, and mammoth LCD monitors, your computer can require as much as 750 watts—or more. And that's just while the thing isn't work: Every day in the U.S., an estimated 133,000 computers are discarded instead of tossed in recycled. As those computers decompose over time, they can leach toxic chemicals like lead, mercury, cadmium, and brominated flame retardants into the air and groundwater. What's a environmental gamer to do? Here are some easy, pain-free ways to take action without sacrificing your gaming rig.

1 USE YOUR PC'S BUILT-IN SLEEP FUNCTION

The National Resources Defense Council estimates that by using Windows Vista's sleep mode, you can reduce your computer's energy consumption by more than 60 percent. If every one in America did the same, we could cut electric bills nationwide by $100 million and prevent 3 million tons of power-plant pollution from entering the atmosphere.

But before you jerk, flip your living room entertainment center's switch. In fact, at Amazon.com, designed one to save energy but to protect CRT televisions from burnout in returns, set pretty much obsolete now that LCD screens are commonplace.

2 TURN OFF YOUR ELECTRONICS

According to Consumer Electronics Association, standby power accounts for $4 billion in energy costs each year. So turn off and unplug your computer (and accessories) when you're not using them. You'll save money, and the peripheral thrives, and reader, and you can even add back all those everything bits' longer, too.

We know what you're thinking. No, it's not bad to turn your PC on and off. Maybe once upon a time—back in the Pleistocene Wave Age—but most newer models handle the temperature fluctuations, but we do think a long way since then. These days, you can safely switch off your PC without fear of damage.

3 UPGRADE TO GREEN COMPONENTS

Finally: An excuse to upgrade. Most components now make environmentally friendly versions of their computer components. In fact, going green often means you're buying the speediest, most powerful models on the market.

You can start by switching to an LCD monitor, which requires one-third of the power of a CRT and is lead-free. You can also upgrade to lead-free hard drives, heat sinks, fans, and motherboards. While you're at it, ditch the standard power supply, which draws more power than you need, and move to an "80 Plus" power supply, which draws only what's necessary for a given load. The more load runs up to 85 percent efficient. A year.

4 SWITCH TO "GREEN ENERGY"

More and more power companies allow you to buy into green power—electricity sourced wholly or in part by renewable energy sources like solar or wind. Green power is more expensive than regular power, but by using it, you can support R&D in renewable energy sources and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

The Department of Energy estimates that green power is now available to half of all power consumers. To see if it's offered in your area, call your local supplier.

5 RECYCLE YOUR OLD PC

Donating your old PC is an excellent way to save parts and hassle, but eventually, it'll go to the great landfill in the sky. Ensure it's recycled responsibly. Dell and Hewlett-Packard (HP) both offer free recycling programs for their own computers, and Dell will even take competitors' machines for a fee. Best Buy also offers free recycling for computers and peripherals, including those from competitors. Check out the Electronics Takeback Coalition (www.takebackcoalition.org) for more information.

Or, if your machine is still relatively powerful, consider donating it to a school or charity. Check out Computers for Schools (www.computersforschools.org) or Computers for Learning (www.computersforlearning.gov) to find a school in need near you. Before donating, however, be sure to remove all personal data from your hard drive. Simply deleting files won't do the trick; you'll need to use a program like Darik's Boot and Nuke (www.dban.org) to wipe your drive clean.

Finally, if your machine is truly dead, you can still salvage some of its components. Video cards, memory, and hard drives can all be sold on eBay or Craigslist. Or, if you're feeling really ambitious, you can build a new machine entirely from your old parts. Check out Tom's Hardware (www.tomshardware.com) for tips and tutorials.

Have a green tip of your own? Share it with your fellow readers in the forums at www.gamepro.com/forum. And be sure to check out our Gaming Green blog at www.gamepro.com/blog/gaminggreen, where we'll be posting more green tips and tricks in the coming months.

—Lara Crigger

• What Could Lara Do? Crystal Dynamics riffs on a moral mantra to explain Ms. Croft's new moves.

IT TOOK EIGHT GAMES AND A FEW TRIPS AROUND THE GLOBE FOR LARA CROFT TO FIGURE OUT WHO SHE WANTED TO BE

• Crowd control: Kick a panther's nose and watch it run away (momentarily).

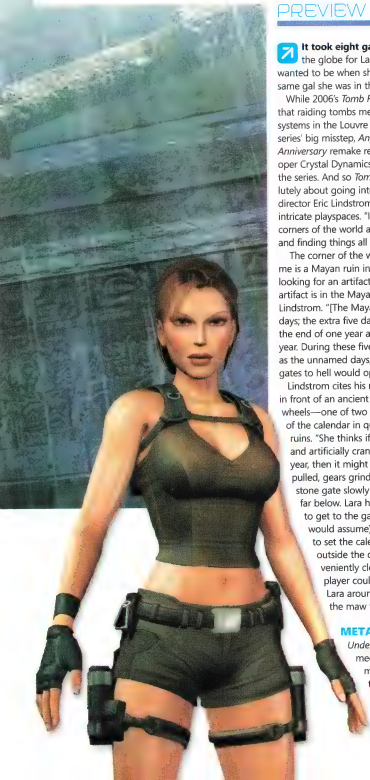
• Lara takes out some poachers stationed outside the gates to Xibalba.

TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

Lara Croft sticks to her guns

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW



It took eight games and a few trips around the globe for Lara Croft to figure out who she wanted to be when she grew up; pretty much the same gal she was in the first place.

While 2006's *Tomb Raider: Legend* wisely reasoned that raiding tombs meant *not* dodging laser-security systems in the Louvre (a central set piece in the series' big misstep, *Angel of Darkness*), last year's *TR: Anniversary* remake reminded players—and developer Crystal Dynamics—what folks really dug about the series. And so *Tomb Raider: Underworld* "is absolutely about going into ancient tombs," says creative director Eric Lindstrom. It's elaborate puzzles and intricate playspaces. "It's about going to the four corners of the world and being a solitary explorer and finding things all on your own."

The corner of the world Crystal Dynamics shows me is a Mayan ruin in Mexico, where Lara Croft is looking for an artifact (natch). "She believes the artifact is in the Mayan underworld, Xibalba," says Lindstrom. "[The Mayan] calendar only had 360 days; the extra five days were this no man's land at the end of one year and the beginning of the next year. During these five days—they were just known as the unnamed days, or the nameless days—the gates to hell would open up."

Lindstrom cites his mythology while Lara's parked in front of an ancient apparatus of concentric stone wheels—one of two rock-carved representations of the calendar in question hiding among the ruins. "She thinks if she can take these calendars and artificially crank them to that part of the year, then it might open the gates." Levers are pulled, gears grind, and sure enough, a heavy stone gate slowly slides open in the courtyard far below. Lara has a small amount of time to get to the gate (and enter Xibalba, one would assume) before it closes and she has to set the calendar again. A motorcycle just outside the calendar alcove—parked conveniently close for the demo, though the player could have left it anywhere—races Lara around a jungle track and through the maw to hell.

META-LANGUAGE

Underground's biggest changes are mechanical, not conceptual. The major one—despite the fact that it makes up only a fraction of the gameplay—comes in combat. "No more shooting fish in a barrel," says Lindstrom, as black panthers run down ancient steps to engage in combat with human poachers. "The enemies are able to get up on architecture, run up and down stairs—to be able to chase Lara down and run around complex cover so the player can't just find a safe spot and duck and shoot." (Naughty Dog's recent PlayStation 3 adventure *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, which in some ways out-*Tomb Raider*-ed *Tomb Raider*, immediately springs to mind.) "She can also split up her guns and fire at two different targets simultaneously. The [poachers] are making decisions whether to fight Lara or the panthers. She has a number of melee options to get people away." One option: Pick up a cast-aside pole—something Lindstrom dubs a "dynamic object"—and use it to bonk an approaching panther on the nose to make it temporarily run away.

This same dynamic object serves double duty as a gymnastics pole when inserted into a hole in the architecture, so Lara can grab hold and swing up to a higher position. A placeholder "press this button to interact with me!" icon appears on the screen, but Lindstrom aims to eliminate the need for it. "We're going to use normal visual language to convey that without using meta-language on the screen. But having the option of putting meta-language on the screen is something we're looking at also—for people who don't want to pay that much attention."

WCLD?

"Lara can do a lot of new things," says Lindstrom, "and we arrived at them through a philosophy called 'What Could Lara Do?'—WCLD. It's shorthand for having the player be able to use their own intuition about what someone with her abilities should be able to do in an environment such as this, and consistency across the different mechanics and abilities. If she can throw a grenade, then if she can pick up this pole, why can't she throw it?" It's subtle stuff, mostly: She can shimmy around corners, reach out her arms to nearby ledges without having to leap, or shoot from atop of architecture instead of just on the ground. Even her grappling hook's rope now has tensile strength—I watch as Lara latches one end onto a distant point and uses the tightrope to push a giant brick off the top of a post. Debris and corpses are persistent, never vanishing from the world—"to not only reward the player for the effect they're having on the world," says Lindstrom, "but to give them navigational aids. *Underworld* doesn't have the linear progression of *Legend*—it's more about interconnected spaces where you have to understand the meaning and relationship of places and objects." And jumping your motorbike through the gates of Xibalba. ● **Sean Molloy**

GODS

COVER FEATURE

Despite Chris Taylor's... how do you put it?...*energy*, the maverick developer likes to keep a low profile and think small. Gas Powered Games, the company he founded 10 years ago, doesn't feel like a huge blockbuster-producing development house. It's no fly-by-night, four-guys-in-a-garage operation, either, but teams are tiny (the size of *Demigod's* squad only recently hit double digits), and each group functions like a self-contained unit instead of a cog in a larger machine. Each runs its own servers, owns all of its own equipment, and makes its own rules. This is how independent game development infects a big-league developer, circa 2008. >

BY EVAN SHAMOON

AND

Gas Powered Games' *Demigod* isn't just another walk in the pantheon

MONSTERS

And like many other indies, Gas Powered Games wants to mash up gameplay and mutate genres. The difference is that GPG has a deeper well to draw from than most pajama programmers. Cult classic *Total Annihilation* was Taylor's first brainchild back in 1997, and since then, his company's produced *Dungeon Siege* and *Supreme Commander* along with their respective sequels and expansion packs. Sift through this back catalog and you'll find plenty of real-time strategy and fistfuls of roleplaying, but never in the same box. That's changing with *Demigod*.

PASSING THE TORCH

As the company's CEO and creative director of the project, Taylor is very much involved with *Demigod* ("My job is to watch over the project, to make sure it's on track creatively and moving smoothly," he says), but it is not "his game," so to speak. It's mostly in the hands of lead designer John Comes and producer Bob Berry.

Taylor decided to hand off the baton after remembering the chance he was once given to chase his first big idea. After years of grinding away at Electronic Arts, he eventually came under the tutelage of celebrated game designer Ron Gilbert at Humongous Entertainment in 1996. It was Gilbert who trusted Taylor to make *Total Annihilation* (under Humongous's Cavedog Entertainment label) to fulfill his vision. "He gave me this incredible opportunity as a designer to create something that was completely from my head, that I had a passion for," recalls Taylor. Behind him, boxed copies of all of his games sit on a bookshelf above his desk—a constant reminder of where he came from. "[Gilbert] kept other people from interfering with my vision and [allowed] me to speak to the world about my game. That's what I'm doing here with John and Bob—[trying] to pass on the good karma that got passed on to me. That's one of the things that makes this whole project so exciting."

Comes corroborates the story. "There wasn't a whole lot of initial direction," he chuckles. "Chris wanted us to take this awesome [*Supreme Commander*] engine we built and make a fantasy game." Those were the only marching orders Taylor gave—just go do it. Comes and Berry did just that, plugging away until they came up with something they were ready to call GPG's "Next Big Thing." "We've talked a lot about doing something new and really taking a chance," says Taylor with confidence. "Now, after 10 years, we're finally putting our money where our mouth is."

GENRE BLENDER

So what exactly is *Demigod*? Whether your top-down gaming preferences lean toward the pointy-clicky *Diablo* variety or the draw-a-box-then-pointy-clicky *WarCraft III* flavor, you're covered. That's because half of this game's demigods (the game's heroes, essentially) cater to the former, and half of them to the latter. Pick the demigod of bean counting and go crazy with micromanagement: build spires, towers, and weapons for a bigger, better, badder base than your opponent's.

Those more into the action-RPG loot slot-machine mentality have an option as well: collect stuff and power up your character into the ultimate ass-kicker with more magic rings, amulets, and jewels than you'd find in a Wal-Mart vending machine. (To say nothing of the potions.)

It's at once both an RPG and an RTS—and it can be significantly more of whichever you prefer. The developers call it a "strategic fighting game." Playing the game with one demigod is a different experience from playing the game with another. The asymmetric balancing act means that each major character has its own strengths, weaknesses, features, and—of course—strategies to employ.

"The toughest thing has been trying to innovate a new type of gameplay," Comes says. Other developers have attempted hybridizing genres over the years. Whether it's the commander mode in *Battlefield 2* or S2's *Savage* games, which combine FPS, mild RPG, and RTS gaming into one experience, the notion of melding genres is hardly new.

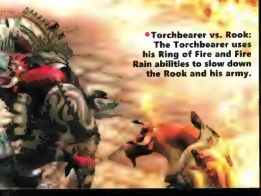
"You have to keep iterating, trying new things until everyone has a good time playing it," Berry says. Oddly, the one thing that inspired Comes and Berry the most was a mod: *Demigod* owes a great debt to a user-created custom map for *WarCraft III* called *Defense of the Ancients*. "We loved what [the modmakers] did with that project," Berry says. "The people that created and built upon [*Defense of the Ancients*] have really nailed the whole 'hero combat' thing. We're trying to take that concept to the next level."

ONE FOR ALL

Taylor compares the gameplay to *Battlefield 2*—minus the firearms and first-person view. Everyone goes online to play other people, but the single-player game is more or less a training ground with bots. "We still have this fantastic world with stories we could tell," Taylor says, "we just don't think people want that. If they do, we can easily build out a campaign, though."

Demigod also intends to incorporate another basic tenet of FPS and RTS games: co-op >

It's a regular clash of the titans (OK, Giants).



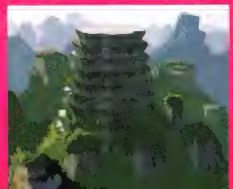
Torchbearer vs. Rook: The Torchbearer uses his Ring of Fire and Fire Rain abilities to slow down the Rook and his army.

CREATING A SCI-FANTASY ...or "Don't call it steampunk!"

Demigod is not particularly about story, but its action leaps from a *Clash of the Titans*–esque premise: There's an opening in the pantheon, and demigods are battling to fill the vacancy. Among the wannabes: The Rook is a long-dead, highly revered king whose spirit is imbued in a giant walking castle (that's the dude gracing the cover of this magazine) and who loves bashing the ground beneath him with his mighty mallet. The flame- and ice-throwing Torch Bearer is the charred, undead remains of a vicious warlord burned to death by his subjects. Regulus (known internally as "The Sniper") was once an angel and servant of the gods—before a demon went and cut off his wings. Now he embraces the weapons of the mortals, such as his large harpoon-launching crossbow.

The art is a bit more "techno" than one might expect from what is ostensibly a fantasy game, but it's "more magic techno than techno techno," according to art director Nate Simpson. "Basically, we didn't want it to look Tolkien-esque, because that's been done a thousand times. And we had a 'no guns' rule because then you start treading into steampunk territory." (Though weapons like the aforementioned harpoon-launching crossbow come pretty close.) So GPG came up with their own version of a galaxy far, far away—and instead of a long time ago, the result is what our concept of "fantasy" would look like if you accelerated it 3,000 years. "It's a world where technology hasn't advanced, but magic has," says Comes. "So it doesn't look like our future; it looks like the future of a fantasy world."

The levels are smaller and more self-contained than those found in *Supreme Commander*. The level we tested takes place atop a tall spire elevated above the clouds, with a series of waterfalls pouring from the structure. Another takes place on the back of an enormous, snaking serpent statue. These worlds are inhabited by Cataputtasaur (which are exactly what they sound like) and air units called Angels, along with dozens of other monsters and humanoids. This world looks anything but ordinary.



Look to the skies! Angels are the dive-bombers of the *Demigod* universe. Equipped with long swords for swooping attacks from the air, squadrons of Angels can make quick work of ground units.

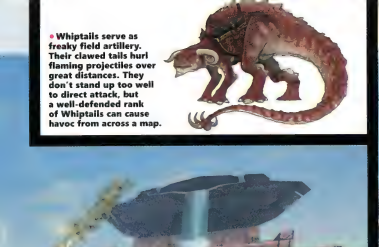
This foe of Whiptail's won't last long against a phalanx of Minotaur soldiers. A Giant makes sure nobody gets too close to the artillery.

CASUAL'S NOT A DIRTY WORD

Not just for the hardcore—but still hardcore enough

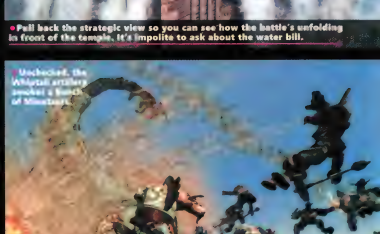
This may seem strange coming from a developer of some of the most hardcore genre games around, but *Demigod* is trying to being a little bit casual. Maybe that's because Comes, Berry, and a good deal of the team are family men. They say as much—and still-shrink-wrapped copies of *BioShock* and *Call of Duty 4* stand as a testament: These are people that don't have 20-plus hours to invest in hardcore gaming sessions. Making *Demigod* a pick-up-and-play affair, Comes explains, was important in order to reach both the casual and the hardcore gamer. They aren't taking this distinction lightly. The first step is letting the game be as simple—or complex—as the player desires. The next move is keeping a close eye on the time. How long will matches last? "Around 20 to 40 minutes, depending on how many people are involved—*maybe* as long as 50 with 10 crazy players going at it. But no longer than that," Comes says.

Besides stomping, one of the Black's special abilities is his Tower of Light attack. The crystal in his crazy shoulderguard shoots a light beam from his own side's Towers of Light nearby.



• Whiptails serve as freaky field artillery. Their clawed tails hurl flaming projectiles over great distances. They don't stand up too well to direct attack, but a well-defended rank of Whiptails can cause havoc from across a map.

• Pull back the strategic view so you can see how the battle's unfolding in front of the temple. It's impolite to ask about the water bill.



• Unchecked, the Whiptail artillery smashes a bunch of Minotaurs.

"OUR FOCUS HAS BEEN ON GAMEPLAY—TO MAKE THE GAME WORK FROM DAY ONE."

—JOHN COMES, LEAD DESIGNER GAS POWERED GAMES

combat. Essentially, the single-player and online co-op content work exactly the same. The only difference is that in single-player, bots sub in for human teammates (or opponents).

"We're spending a lot of time making sure our A.I. is competitive in order to make this a very viable way of playing," Comes says. So, instead of you and four of your closest friends playing against five of your most hated enemies, you can tag-team some A.I. bots of varying difficulty—"comp stomping," as real-time strategists call it.

Each character's complementary abilities make teamwork and communication important. If you're trying to get an enemy demigod out of the game, you may have one teammate freeze the target then coordinate with your high damage–dealing demigods to come in and take out the enemy before the freeze wears off. Then, while you distract your opponents, the most productive demigod on your team could build an army and swing around on the flank to assault the enemy stronghold.

BORROWED TIME

A quick roll of the scroll wheel shifts *Demigod*'s view. Starting at the ground level and whipping up into the air, the player quickly and easily navigates the map—*Demigod*'s panning and zooming are remarkably intuitive. If that sounds familiar, it's because that's the "strategic zoom" mechanic GPG pioneered in *Supreme Commander* to keep track of the sci-fi RTS's chaotic action. The developers are quick to stress that this isn't simply *Supreme Commander* with a fantasy theme, though. Still, the team has thoroughly borrowed technology and ideas from internal projects.

Even after liberating much from other GPG games, the team proceeds cautiously with development. "Our focus has been on quality of gameplay—to make the game work from day one, in white box form," says Berry. (White boxing, for those who don't design games for a living, is when developers drop objects into an empty space to make sure they'll work in-game.) "We really wanted to get to a point where we didn't need to change too much stuff around when it came time to create the art assets." Largely, this strategy went according to plan. For nine months, the most people saw of the game was textureless objects (or reskinned with art from other games) in an empty room. "We played until it was fun, even without >

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS

More than just bonus points

Anyone who's jumped on Xbox Live or Games for Windows Live knows how bizarrely (but deeply) satisfying Achievements can be. It's a bit like getting the virtual equivalent of a gold star. *The Demigod* team plans to do more than give players a couple of points and a pat on the back. "Our Achievements will (effect) how far a player has gone with certain demigods, how far they've gone in the single-player experience, and how much they've accomplished online," says lead designer John Comes. Like RPG loot, you can flaunt what you've done in-game to other players. You can deck out your castle with fluttering flags and swirling, glowing spires, or sport some festooned costumes. It's all about the pimplification of your troops. Then there's the intimidation factor: You'll know exactly how outclassed you are the second you step onto the battlefield.

A Rook is walking castle possessed by a dead king's spirit) leads his army into battle

graphics," Comes says. Still, Taylor admits that they made necessary concessions. "The way things work now [in the industry], you need to show people your game early to start getting the buzz going. So this means starting asset creation while you're still tuning gameplay—if we could just work in a bubble, with no press, no publisher, nobody to worry about, we'd wait until the gameplay was perfect before starting to create the art. But we can't, so we don't," Taylor says. "What we're seeing now is only 60 to 70 percent as great as it's gonna look when it's done."

Demigod has no publisher—and Taylor doesn't want one. Following the path of true indie mavericks, GPG plans to self-fund and self-publish *Demigod*. "This is a huge deal for us," says Taylor, beaming about the gamble. "We have this huge GPG network in place, so why don't we partner with people to distribute the game online and at retail?" You could see it over Steam, on Direct2Drive, or GameStop—or on store shelves.

Beyond shedding the publisher-developer relationship, Taylor looks forward to working on different aspects of the business (down to the package design). "The PC business has changed over the past 10 years," he adds, "and we need to keep changing with it. Whether it's creating new ways to play, new ways to deliver the game, or new ways to interact with the community." Pausing for a full second to catch his breath, Taylor smiles. "This is the kind of stuff that gets me up in the morning!"

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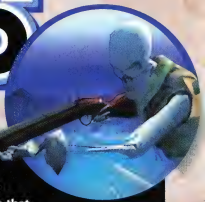
RATING PENDING RP ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

52 FREE GAMES

A YEAR'S WORTH OF GRATIS GAMING



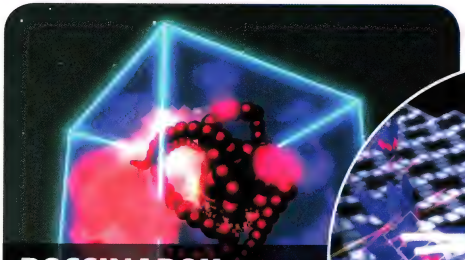
While you're waiting around for the next *Orange Territory: BioGate Crysis—Tournament in Conflict* to appear, hundreds of little independent and free games continue to pile up unplayed. And believe it or not, saving pennies can put you on the cutting edge, as today's freebies are résumés for tomorrow's gaming greats: The team that created *Portal* cut its teeth on *Narbacular Drop*; the PlayStation 3 downloadable hit *Everyday Shooter* got its start as potential PC freeware—until Sony scooped it up after a gangbusters Game Developers Conference showing. (Slow on the uptake? We profile some indie programmers who've made a big splash with their little games on pg. 58.) So make a New Year's resolution: Let 2008 be the Year of Freeware. To help you stick to it, we've gathered 52 fantastic games. That's one for every week of the year. Not enough? Hit freegames.1UP.com for 101 more!

BY DARREN GLADSTONE AND SCOTT SHARKEY*

*DEPUTY FREELOADERS

SHOOTING GALLERY

GRATUITY-FREE *GRADIUS*

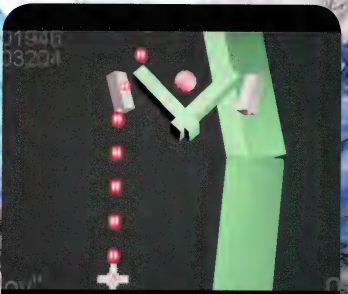


BOSSINABOX

Most shooters make you suffer through waves of useless drones until you reach the big baddie at the end. Who needs that kind of button-jammed foreplay? *Bossinabox* is one long, frustratingly tough boss fight. If that doesn't scare you away, enjoy the challenge. Move the crosshair around the cube's exterior. As you blast the boss to bits, multiple Mini-Mes spawn in to make your life hell. **http://www.digipen.edu/GameGallery/websites/BossInABox/index.html**

SYNAESTHETE

Part shooter, part rhythm game, and all kinds of awesome. On the surface, *Synaesthete* looks like a mashup of *Robotron* and *Guitar Hero*. As the colored bars drop to the trance soundtrack, you must avoid foes and fight back by beat matching. Our little secret: Despite how much fun the game is and how unique it looks—we're actually playing it just for the music. **https://typo3.digipen.edu/index.php?id=986**



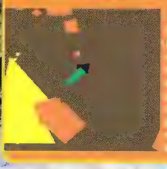
PROTOGANDA: STRINGS

The inevitable truth of *Protoganda*: You are going to die. This stressful shooter gives you three minutes to blast round after round of Gouraud-shaded polygon collections with weird Russian names while seeking a safe path through their hellstorm of bullets. Kill more, live longer. Live longer, kill more.

***Strings* is the first installment in what its creator promises to be a series; *Strings* focuses on bosses; the sequel (or is it second episode?) will offer swarms of smaller enemies, too. www.cactus-soft.co.nr**

FRAXY

How many shooting games come with a boss editor packed in? Snap together a nest of Vulcan cannons. Maybe give it some flamethrowers at the end of octopus arms, and then stick on a buddy. Or just make a spaceship that looks like flying naughty bits. **http://mokeron.hp.infoseek.co.jp/zg/fraxy_main.html**



MSOIDS

10-MINUTE TIME WASTERS

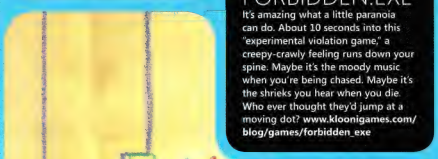
QUICK, WHILE YOUR BOSS IS ON THE PHONE!

XTREME XMAS SHOPPING

Screw sharing and togetherness—we all know that this is the season for fighting with strangers over the right to acquire material goods. A combination of minigame and mini-social commentary, you compete with raging moms for the best holiday sale deals. 'Tis the season for pushing, shoving, and acquiring every gift on your list before they're sold out. Sure to provoke at least one bout of Charlie Brown-ish existential angst or your money back.
http://persuasivegames.com/games/game.aspx?game=arcadewirexmas

FORBIDDEN.EXE

It's amazing what a little paranoia can do. About 10 seconds into this "experimental violation game," a creepy-crawly feeling runs down your spine. Maybe it's the moody music when you're being chased. Maybe it's the shrieks you hear when you die. Who ever thought they'd jump at a moving dot? **www.kloonigames.com/blog/games/forbidden_exe**



CRAYON PHYSICS

What looks like a couple of crayon scribbles on construction paper is actually an ingenious puzzle game. Draw squares and they appear in the game world as a physical object; use the objects to roll a ball to a goal. As it's moddable, the community has created a slew of stuff for download—including some retro NES-themed levels. The *Deluxe* version, which promises a lot more versatility, may be out within the next month. **www.kloonigames.com/blog/games/crayon**

MORE TIME WASTERS...

QUICK, WHILE YOUR EMPLOYEES THINK YOU'RE ON THE PHONE!

COTTAGE OF DOOM

Cottage of Doom won TIGSource's B-Game competition—and given how many zombie survival games are out there, that's something of an accomplishment. It's more than a top-down shooter, though. The ability to board up doors and make barricades out of furniture adds strategy to the carnrage. **http://planetfreeplay.com/game/Cottage-of-Doom/?pfp=b08d48aa1b517c9cc9cb4b92f3a3feaa**

PLATFORM

Here's a novel idea: an episodic puzzle/platforming game that you play in a browser. Interesting enough, but taking control of two separate characters and splitting them up to solve increasingly intricate puzzles makes this the best thing since *The Lost Vikings*. **www.platformthegame.com/index.html**

SPLUME

Match colored goop and clear the screen. Yup, gameplay made famous by *Bust-A-Move* and pretty much half the puzzle games we've ever played—but *Splume* has a couple of extra things going for it. First, its presentation is fantastic. Second, applying physics to the falling balls adds an extra layer of strategy. **http://splume.flashbangstudios.com**

ADVENTURER'S ISLAND

JUMP AND EXPLORE, POINT AND CLICK

MANIAC MANSION MANIA

If you miss classic adventuring, you should download this ongoing series of fan-made *Maniac Mansion* episodes. The only downside is that about half of them haven't been translated from German yet—but if you're too impatient for the next one, you can use the site's Starter pack and make your own. Here's looking forward to all kinds of new critters to microwave.

www.maniac-mansion-mania.com

TEMPO

If the X-Men taught us anything, it's that one should never mess with wheelchair-bound psychics. Telekinesis and astral projection abilities make platforming and puzzle-solving a lot more manageable (if not actually *easy*). But *Tempo* stands out among 3D independent games as a little artsy and a whole lot polished.

www.igf.com/php-bin/entry2008.php?id=319

WELCOME TO AGAINST ALL ODDS!
THE GAME THAT LETS YOU EXPERIENCE WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A REFUGEE
OPEN IN FULLSCREEN
OPEN IN THIS WINDOW

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Videogames have taught us how to survive zombie sieges and alien invasions, but here's an exploration of something a little more practical and frightening.

This browser-based Flash game's a *Choose Your Own Adventure* with a message. Brought to you by the U.N. Refugee Agency, *Against All Odds* teaches what life is like as a refugee in war-torn nations. The game comes in three "chapters"—first, your escape; second, your arrival in a neighboring country; and finally, adjusting to your new life. It's fun and depressing at the same time.

www.playagainstallodds.com

DARKWIND

If pop culture's taught us anything, it's that the most awesome part of the apocalypse will be strapping guns onto your muscle car to fend for your life. Based on the classic *Car Wars* board games, *Darkwind* is turn-based online strategic road rage. It could be the best thing going since *Auto Assault* drove off a cliff.

www.dark-wind.com

MAKIBISHI COMIC

Sometimes, you see a foreign game so strange you can only pray something was lost in translation. This Web game is one of them. Man was never meant to see a giant baby wearing a gas mask farting death clouds over people. And yet, man does. And man keeps playing.
http://comic.makibishi.co.jp

HASSLEVANIA

A satirical tribute of Hasselhoffian proportions to the 8-bit classic *Castlevania*. Help Rovert Bellhump get some sleep by destroying his noisy neighbor, Count Dracula. The Hoff does make a cameo—or at least his head does—appearing in the place of those annoying Medusa heads that love to knock you into spikes. **http://del_duio.sitesled.com/HasslevaniaHasslevaniaHOME.html**

A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

This graphic adventure isn't merely some tribute to days gone by—that isn't really doing it justice. If *A Tale of Two Kingdoms* came out during the genre's heyday, we'd probably be waxing nostalgic about it today in the same breath as *King's Quest* and *Gabriel Knight*.
http://crystalshard.net/atotk.php

5 MODS

FOR GTA, HALF-LIFE 2, AND MORE

BACK TO THE FUTURE: HILL VALLEY

This inventive *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* mod is a work in progress, but damn, it's cool. Right now, the time travel doesn't accomplish much beyond changing the time of day, but who doesn't want a flying DeLorean or steam train in their *GTA* game?
http://grandtheftauto.filefront.com/file/Back_to_the_Future_Hill_Valley_for_GTA_Vice_City;84317

FORTRESS FOREVER

Is *TF2* too much change for you? The *Fortress Forever* mod for *Half-Life 2* is calling with the siren song of classic classes, grenades, and bunny hopping.
www.fortress-forever.com

HALF LIFE 2: WARS

The fight between humans and the Combine takes an RTS turn with this mod. Even early on in its development—it only has the basics in place (no base-building)—we dig it. You'll need *HL2* and *Episode One* to play.
http://hl2wars.hirse.net

BATTLEFIELD: PIRATES 2

This *BF2* mod mashes up two favorites—pirates and the undead—as they battle for control of the high seas. Ship-based combat and blunderbusses replace modern gear. If the mod included ninjas, the circle of internet memes would be complete.
www.bfpirates.com

RED ALERT: A PATH BEYOND

Once upon a time, *Command & Conquer: Renegade* let you walk through the C&C universe FPS-style. Meh gameplay be damned, we soldiered on. *Renegade*'s now fully modded for *Red Alert* lore, so check out the multiplayer total conversion's six test maps (and all the character classes).
www.apathbeyond.com

MORE ADVENTURE GAMES

I WANNA BE THE GUY

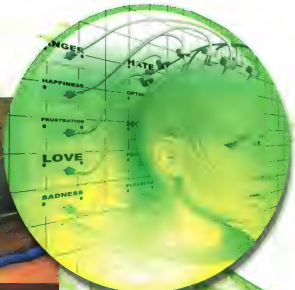
The NES tribute *IWBTG* hates you. You'll die a thousand death and know you deserved every one of them in this punishing—but funny—adventure. All the NES references, like the 100-foot-tall fire-breathing Mike Tyson, are just icing on the cake.
http://kayin.pyoko.org/iwbtg

RORSCHACH

Style oozes out of this black-and-white noir adventure's every pixel. The art is oddly abstract, cute for a murder mystery set in an insane asylum, but it makes the atmosphere all the more disorientingly dark. Plus, you can take *Rorschach* with you if you happen to have a homebrew-ready PlayStation Portable.
www.collectingsmiles.com/rorschach

BRAIN DRAIN

PUZZLE AND STRATEGY GAMES



INTROSPECT

Technically, this artsy *Unreal Tournament 2004* conversion is a mod—but it deserves extra props. Trading link guns for a painter's palette, *Introspect* walks you into the head of a modern-art wannabe. Use your paintbrush FPS-style to draw solutions to game puzzles that'll remind you of choice *Psychonauts* nightmares. (When you see the bouncy toilets or reality-twisting hallways, you'll understand.)
http://digitalcandygames.com/index.html

TACTICS 100 LIVE

A little bit *Archon*, a lot bit *Fire Emblem* (a Nintendo DS strategy game), *Tactics 100 Live* gives you instant action and fantasy combat laid out on a chessboard. Each "piece" has unique abilities that level up in battle. The best part about this web-game is that you can skirmish against the CPU or go head-to-head with live players in your browser. **www.gamebrew.com/info-tactics-100-live**

ABSTRACTICA 3

Imagine that the SATs glove-slapped you and challenged you to a duel—that's what you're in store for with *Abstractica 3*. Over 500 random puzzles lurk inside, each one testing everything from your math skills and observational abilities to your endurance levels. If you do actually win the battle of wits before running for a bottle of aspirin, you can compare egos on the website rankings. **www.abstractica.mjkgames.com**

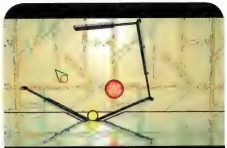
MORE BRAINY FUN

EXCIT

Most people don't categorize spreadsheets as "fun." The proof that most people are wrong: this Web-based Excel puzzle/maze. Navigate the cursor to the exit without running off the page. Since it looks like you're navigating a real spreadsheet, this is the perfect mid-day time-killer at work.
www.pixer.org/excit

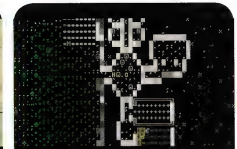
ANTBUSTER

Hordes of moochy ants invading your favorite picnic spot? The best defense: upgradeable cannon turrets, of course! Set up towers at strategic points and squash incoming bugs. Really, this isn't much more than a polished tribute to *Desktop Tower Defense* (see pg. 58)—but it's still a lot of fun. **www.armorgames.com/games/antbuster.html**



P.H.L.O.P.

Don't know about you, but we miss all those Rube Goldberg ways to get the ball rolling in the morning. ("Say what?" Just think of *The Incredible Machine*.) The P.H.L.O.P. is just a ball. It moves wherever physics dictates. Your goal: Get said P.H.L.O.P. to the exit while squashing enemies with widgets.
www.digipen.edu/GameGallery/websites/PHLOP



SLAVES TO ARMOK: GOD OF BLOOD—CHAPTER II: DWARF FORTRESS

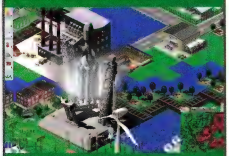
Old-school hardcore gaming nerds love this game. A celebration of all things dorky, this amazingly detailed fantasy sim/city manager/RPG defies simple categorization. It also defies graphics—it's composed entirely of ASCII art.
www.gamershell.com/download_21832.shtml

ACIDBOMB 2: REARMED

Jack Bauer makes disarming bombs and yelling "I'm a federal officer!" look easy. However, there's a new mad genius at work—and this game is the fruit of his labor. Last year we saluted the original *Acidbomb*, a bunch of great puzzle minigames masquerading as terrorist threats that you must "diffuse." This new one overhauls the first with over 50 devious levels. **www.vertigogaming.net/acidbomb2.htm**

SIM CITY

IT'S LIKE REAL LIFE, ONLY NOT

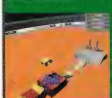


LINCITY

Got a craving for a *SimCity*-style game? This tribute keeps the classic gameplay mechanics alive then updates them with some sweet graphics (and an isometric 3D engine). **http://www.floot.demon.co.uk/lincity.html**

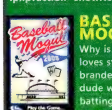
DARK CUT 2: BIVOUAC

You know those cutesy console games where you cut up patients (see *Trauma Center: Under the Knife* for Nintendo DS)? This Web-based sim ain't that. You're a Civil War medic trying to patch people up with not much more than a scalpel and a bottle of whiskey.
www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/406657



STUNT PLAYGROUND

Kids used to lay out Hot Wheels tracks and shoot die-cast metal cars through 'em—the same concept is at work in this PC freebie. Build the craziest stunt track you can imagine, and then drive a couple laps.
http://walaber.com/index.php?action=showitem&id=7



BASEBALL MOGUL 2006

Why is it that a guy who loves statistics classes is branded a nerd while some dude who analyzes RBIs vs. batting averages for the Mets is cool? This now-free sports management sim packs stats from players between 1901 and 2005. Number crunchers will love it; everyone else will get stuck trying to figure out a way to get Babe Ruth hooked on steroids.
www.sportsmogul.com/store.html

IF Comp 2007

INTERACTIVE FICTION COMPETITION

Back in a long-ago time when game controls consisted solely of typing phrases like "open door" or "take shovel," text-only games ruled the roost. Yearning for the good ol' days? Technically, you can count this link to the 2007 Interactive Fiction Competition as over 20 games.
http://ifcomp.org/comp07/download.html

STOPPLE

Most good puzzles start with a simple concept. In this case, you need to get a block to drop in a hole. Doesn't sound hard, does it? Yeah, that's what we said about three hours ago when we started playing. If you don't want to download this, look up *Bloxorz*, the Flash game that inspired *Stopple*.
www.boiledsweets.com/Stopple

DESKTOP ARCADE

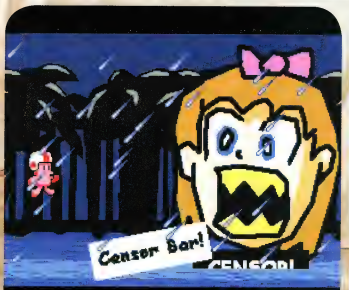
NO NEED TO GET CHANGE FOR A DOLLAR

GAL EX: SPATIAL DELIVERY

You and your gelatinous buddy Goup are partners in the interstellar delivery business. Goup can do all sorts of useful things—like form huge arms to wallop enemies or bounce around the world. That's especially handy when your delivery ship crash-lands on a back-water world teeming with angry robots. Honestly, we're a little surprised someone isn't charging money for this. **www.ruleofthumb-games.co.uk**

CITY SCRAWLAZ

No discernable artistic talent? That's no problem in this graffiti game. Tap the keys for timing minigames while laying down tags. As a Brit street artist, you need to run about London, avoid the "bobbies"—oh, those English police are so *cute*—and leave your mark on the world. Gameplay is a little on the simple side, but you'll keep at it for the art style. **http://daretobedigital.com/showcase/2004.php**



TEH FORUM GAME

Here's a game for those who've wondered what life is like for the Internet thought police. As Flerppy, you're thrust into the Intarwebz and must survive forum boards in a number of random action minigames. It sounds simple until you realize these threads have giant-headed Japanese schoolgirls, tower-sized plungers, and flying underwear that shoots question marks. No, we're not *entirely* sure what Internet memes the makers are parodying there, either—but we don't want to risk starting a flame war by asking. **www.jonnycomics.com/games.htm**

TRILBY: THE ART OF THEFT

Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw, the fast-talking "Internet celebrity" behind *Zero Punctuation*, created a game with the gravitas of a 12-year-old sliming pizza grease all over the beat-up *Elevator Action* machine at the local bowling alley. This game's take—instead of sneaking between floors, killing foes, and stealing stuff, you're sneaking between floors, *disarming* foes, and stealing stuff. But dammit, the game's fun. **www.escapistmagazine.com/content/games/yahtzee/artoftheft**

QUEST FIGHTER II

A graphic-adventure Kumite? Ingenious! Drop *Monkey Island*'s Guybrush Threepwood into the octagon with a leisure-suited Larry Laffer or any number of old-school adventurers to see who's the best brawler. (Our money is on Roger Wilco.) The only downer: It would*a* been cool to control the fight by typing "go east" or "shoot gun"—perfect for a fighting game, right? **http://crystalshard.net/index.php?p=5**

KLEPTOCRACY!

It's not exactly *Ocean's 11*, but those down for a quick heist should snag this cartoony action game. Like some cel-shaded Sam Fisher, you're hiding in the shadows and avoiding security guards, but the goofball goal is to pull off a series of robberies for bragging rights among your gang. **www.digipen.edu/GameGallery/websites/Kleptocracy/index.htm**

GUNLIMB

Don't call him "differently abled"—especially if he's replaced his appendages with firearms. How does he get around? Simple physics! Shoot a weapon, and the recoil pushes him back. *Gunlimb* manages to be fun, gory, and slightly uncomfortable, all at the same time. Quite an accomplishment. **www.greatgamesexperiment.com/game/gunlimb**

MORE ARCADE GAMES

FLOW

The microscopic game about microbes (PlayStation 3 owners may know it) continues to float around the Internet. Here's how you play: Pick your favorite (legal) mind-altering substance. Hit start. Listen to music. Gobble up anything smaller than you. Watch hours pass in seconds. Alter your mind some more. **http://intihuatani.usc.edu/cloud/flowing**

BIBLE FIGHT

Right, Right, Down, Down, X. Remember that combo because when Moses rains frogs down on someone's ass, you *know* he earned a theological beatdown. In this Web-based biblical *Street Fighter*, you finally learn who'd win in a scrap: Moses or Jesus? Satan or Eve? **www.adultswim.com/games/bibliefight/index.html**

FREE AT LAST

PEOPLE USED TO PAY FOR THESE

TRACKMANIA NATIONS

Racing freaks once coughed up money for this gorgeous 3D racer. The coolest part was that people created all sorts of insane tracks with the built-in editor. That's when the pro gaming circuit took notice. Now, fully sponsored by the Electronic Sports World Cup, this game takes the checkered flag at the Freebie 500. **http://trackmania.filefront.com**

FREESPACE 2

When it comes to 3D space shooters, Wing *Commander* gets all the glory. Screw that, flyboy. *Freespace 2* is easily one of the best 3D space shooters ever made. Now it's public domain. Single-player campaign, multiplayer knife fights—if you aren't downloading this, something's seriously wrong with you. **www.the-underdogs.info/game.php?id=4150**

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 4—ABE LINCOLN MUST DIE!

Sam and Max, a canine Sam Spade and a sociopathic bunny, have been making debasé jokes for...how long now? Twenty years? And during half that time, you couldn't find any new games, comics, or shows about 'em. Just a bunch of angry forum trolls bitching about canceled projects. Now, they're everywhere—and episodic. Grab *Episode Four* (one of Season *One*'s funniest) for free. **http://telltalegames.com/samandmax/file/olreuttdie**

COMMAND & CONQUER GOLD

EA is giving away this classic real-time strategy game. It's part of their grand plan to celebrate over 10 years of commanding and conquering—and make themselves look like something other than the cruel overlords of the game industry. **http://files.filefront.com/Command+and+Conquer+Gold+Freeware/;6468950;/fileinfo.html**

Before Jonathan Mak hit it big with *Everyday Shooter*, he experimented with another musical shooter—*ToJam Thing*. That one is free.

JONATHAN MAK

FEATURE

The thought flits through your head every time a development team makes X happen in its game instead of Y: "I could do better!" Then you come across an article about 52 free games—often built by a one-man show in the spare hours between classes or after work.

Anyone with a copy of Game Maker or a few Flash tutorials under their belt is set to self-publish. The Web is so littered with free games that your browser practically trips over them. While new development tools have made game creation easily accessible, the trick is making a game others will want to play.

STARTING SMALL

"The hardest thing about making a game is finishing it," says *Everyday Shooter* creator Jonathan Mak. "A lot of people start projects and never finish them." That's why it's important to start small—think bite-sized. There's a tendency among novice designers to emulate the big, complex games they play every day. "Take something really simple and get creative with it," Mak suggests. "Just because the game is simple doesn't mean that it can't be grand." *Everyday Shooter* started out as little more than a clone of Japanese Flash-based shooter *Every Extend*. Now Mak has a publishing deal with Sony's PlayStation Network.

Not every concept ends up a success well. Mak tossed out a half dozen ideas before sticking with *Everyday*. The first level's background art is ripped from a scrapped project. "Don't get married to your idea," Mak says. "You can't be afraid to throw out work that you didn't like."

Kloonigames' Petri Purho believes that it's a developer's duty to prove as early as possible that a concept doesn't work: "If you can do it before writing a single line of code, that's really the best." When working on a mechanic, he compiles ugly code, preferably reusing bits from old games. "Use as little effort as possible to see if something is fun."

In July 2007, Purho came up with a concept for a game starring a machine-gun-toting homicidal cupid. His prototype was little more than exploring ways for a circle (cupid) to torment a rag doll (victim). It sucked, but bashing and crushing the doll with a roll or jump got Purho thinking. With Indiana Jones serving as inspiration, Purho transformed a botched shooter into the archaeologist-squashing game *A Tribute to the Rolling Boulder*.

INSPIRATIONAL WORK

School yourself. Go find the mechanic at the heart of a favorite title and emulate it. Think of

SO YOU WANT TO

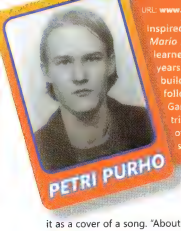
Indie gamemakers share their advice

● It's not complex, but *Desktop Tower Defense* is Web-based RTS crack.

PAUL PREECE

AGE: **24**
LOCATION: **Basingstoke, England**
DESIGNING FOR: **11 months**
NUMBER OF GAMES: **2**
MOST NOTABLE: ***Desktop Tower Defense***
URL: **www.handdrawngames.com**

Preece always wanted to make games, but he had problems finding a programming language that "had a shallow enough learning curve." After a friend developed a Flash title, Preece had a flash of his own. He created the Web-based *Desktop Tower Defense* in a month.



PETRI PURHO

AGE: **24**
LOCATION: **Helsinki, Finland**
DESIGNING FOR: **1 year, 3 months**
NUMBER OF GAMES: **16**
MOST NOTABLE: ***Crayon Physics***
URL: **www.kloonigames.com**

Inspired by games like *Super Mario Bros.*, prodigy Purho learned C++ when he was 8 years old. These days, he's building up his résumé by following the Experimental Gameplay Project's doctrine. He develops each of his titles in less than seven days.

● Screenshots of Petri Purho's *Crayon Physics* (and not just some kid's doodles).

it as a cover of a song. "About 50 percent of the games I'm doing have been done before," says Paul Preece, designer of *Desktop Tower Defense*, "but I'm extending them and putting my own spin on them. I take parts of a game I enjoy and build a new game around them." For *Desktop*, Preece created a game based solely on the real-time strategy genre's "mazing" mechanic—forcing units down a path of destruction—and banning any feature that didn't interact with that primary mechanic.

"If you have a turd and you try to add stuff on top of a turd, it's still going to be a turd," says Mak. Forget upgrade systems and combo multipliers. First, focus on the initial interaction and what makes it cool. "If you look at [Metanet Software's ninja-themed puzzler] *N*, just moving the ninja around, just doing the wall jumps, is already fun. It's not fun to the point where you're like, 'Aw, I can't wait to move the ninja,' but it's already really interesting."

Killer effects can come later. "Good graphics are used to patch up not-so-good gameplay," explains Preece, who's "a little bit embarrassed" by *Desktop*'s hand-drawn units plopped atop a photo of his work area—but the visuals haven't hurt the game's success. Preece quit his day job two months after its release to develop full time.

BETA TESTING

Before releasing a title into the wild, make your friends play it. "That's probably the best thing you can do for your game," Purho says. If you honestly like your game, others will, too. But you need fresh eyes to ensure you've correctly communicated your idea.

Rolling Boulder nearly failed because it wasn't clear the boulder could perform wall jumps. (Without them, it's impossible to reach the game's upper platforms.) Players may stumble, but that doesn't mean gameplay is inherently flawed; correcting the problem may be as simple as reframing the game's intentions.

Remember that there's no right way—and more importantly, don't get discouraged. "Just pretend that when you're making games, you're painting," Mak says. "You can't expect to paint the Mona Lisa the first time out. You have to learn a few things first. Learn how colors work, how to draw—and perspective." ● **Mary Jane Irwin**

Can't get enough freeware? Neither can we! Go online and you'll find another 101 free games and more insights on the indie scene. It's all at GFW15.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

XTRAS

MAKE A GAME

Reviews

Opinions you can trust

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

As a lot of you surely know by now, gaming supersite GameSpot.com's editorial director (and 11-year industry veteran) Jeff Gerstmann was terminated in November under vague circumstances, with a confluence of ill-timed events fueling conspiracy theories that CNET (GameSpot's parent company) buckled to angry advertisers, summarily showing Gerstmann the door in response to a negative game review. CNET's official statement on the matter calls this hypothesis malarkey, and it very well may be—but fact or fiction, the disturbing thing is just how quickly and how plausibly the "foul play" conclusion came together in many minds.

Gaming enthusiast publications like GameSpot (and *GFW*) earn a healthy chunk of revenue from the very companies whose products they cover; I suspect this factor is a subconscious part of what drives many in the gaming press to loudly defend their integrity at even the slightest suggestion of impropriety, and it's certainly served as the central basis for a few witch hunts. In a perfect world, we'd barricade ourselves behind walls of non-game ads, impenetrable to such drama plays. But for whatever reason—despite the supposed multibillion dollar status of the game industry—that hasn't happened. Maybe it's just a pipe dream. Maybe I'm simply defending my integrity. Maybe it's a little bit of both. ● **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

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Equal opportunity serial killers

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JURP
BlackSite: Area 51
The arcade rail shooter's de-evolution

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6 is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9.0 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award. Significantly, this very best in PC gaming

9–10: Excellent
Some flawed titles—commonly so recommended

7–8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws

5–6.5: Average
Makes your thirty-game enthusiasts yawn easily

3–4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues

0–2.5: Terrible
Never should have been released

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW
1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
Between bouts of *World of WarCraft*, Ryan likes to...uh, who are we kidding? "Between bouts of *World of WarCraft*" doesn't exist.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
STAFF EDITOR
Between *BlackSite: Area 51* and *Soldier of Fortune: Payback*, Shawn's had more than his fill of stupid shooters this month.
Current Faves: *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

JAMES MELIKE
EXECUTIVE EDITOR, 1UP.COM
Having clocked approximately 115,386 hours in *Final Fantasy XI*, 1UP.com's resident badass is our go-to guy for everybody's favorite J-MMO.
Current Faves: *Final Fantasy XI*
1UP.com Blog: malkman.1UP.com

SCOTT SHARKEY
STAFF WRITER, 1UP.COM
Sharkey loves to hate anything he can, but it's a nice relief when a decent MMO like *Tabula Rasa* comes his way.
Current Faves: *City of Heroes*, *Tabula Rasa*
1UP.com Blog: solidsharkey.1UP.com

TOM CHICK
STAFF REVIEWER
Tom Chick is a hilarious, Ivy League–educated, beret-wearing ponce who lives in Los Angeles.
Current Faves: *Gears of War*
1UP.com Blog: tomchick.1UP.com

SARAH JAFFER GREEN
STAFF REVIEWER
Ah, ain't nepotism grand? We kid, of course—big boss Jeff Green's little Miss Sunshine shares dear old dad's penchant for prose.
Current Faves: *Viva Piñata*
1UP.com Blog: None of your business!

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Eric's a high-powered corporate attorney, which basically means he spends all day looking for dumb videos on YouTube.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: TheFirmFromSauce.1UP.com

CINDY YANS
STAFF REVIEWER
Likes: Piking dumb newbs.
Dislikes: Getting PK'd.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*, *EverQuest II: Rise of Kunark*
1UP.com Blog: Cindy_Yans.1UP.com

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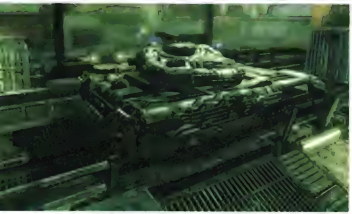
Duel mode is a series of 1-on-1 matches in close quarters.

Pew pew pew!



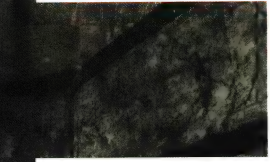
As their centerpiece, maps like Kargo and Containment have confined heavy firepower like this Goliath.

The Warfare mode features orbs that quickly grab enemy nodes.

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3

Otherwise known as *Unreal Tournament 2008*

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Epic Games** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, GeForce 6200 or Radeon 9600 videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**



• **Weather's lovely on Dusk, one of the new maps—wish you were here!**

REVIEW

After a long and fulfilling four years with *Unreal Tournament 2004*, it's a bit surprising that Epic's pulled a *Madden*, giving us a good game that's been tweaked instead of advanced. Perhaps if they'd continued the yearly naming convention instead of switching to ordinal numbers we would've been better prepared for the increment that is *Unreal Tournament 3*.

It doesn't feel very different. You're liable to stumble across doodads like gelatinous cubes and shield pods, but don't look for any new weapons. That the old guns hold up as well as they do underscores Epic's canny sense for balance and variety. But when you're in that shooter groove, fragging and being fragged, the basic sensation is no different than it's been for lo these four years. The visuals don't differ much, even with a thick layer of *Gears of War*–style postprocessing smeared between you and the game. The new looks include a fair bit of Oriental decor and even a giant redwood forest—but the levels are still an orgy of elaborate geometry, choked with details and trim.

MY TRIPOD CAN BEAT UP YOUR TRIPOD

The new Necris race gives Epic a great opportunity to break out of the Gothic-angst-meets-Rob-Liefeld schtick. Necris vehicles are tentacled and funky—part Borg, part *War of the Worlds*—with the towering Darkwalker standing out as one of the coolest things you'll see in a shooter this year. Yeah, sure, they're ripping off Steven Spielberg... but who isn't? Tripods are all the rage these days. The new Warfare mode is a great bit of remodeling, taking the old Onslaught game type and fusing with it scripting tricks from Assault and the ball from Bombing Run. We get plenty of familiar maps (including an ominous new Deck 17) and plenty of new maps, almost all sharp exercises in multiplayer level design. Say what you will about Epic: You can't deny they've cornered the market when it comes to mapmaking talent.

The campaign is a peripheral part of the *UT* experience, but Epic put some energy into it this time, marching you across a map and giving you bonus cards (which bequeath temporary perks ranging from extra bots to higher vehicle HP) to make tough missions easier. Playing missions cooperatively is a great way to power through to the end. It's a bit silly how the story tries to explain spawning and flag captures, only to gradually peter out when it comes to the Warfare mode.

NO ONE CAN ACCUSE EPIC OF A FOOLISH CONSISTENCY.

Speaking of silly: hoverboards? They're a great addition to the gameplay, letting players get where they need to go quickly and with a bit of risk. But the only thing more ridiculous would've been unicycles. Everything looks wicked awesome as a towering Darkwalker rises over the rooftops and uses its death ray to fry a Goliath, while a Scavenger scurries out of a dark alley and disintegrates some dudes. But then along come a couple of hoverboarding jokers, Marty McFly–style, skiing behind a dune buggy. No one can accuse Epic of a foolish consistency.

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS '04

The biggest problem with *UT3* is that it's still so...*2004*. Back then, before *Quake Wars* or *Team Fortress 2*, this was the go-to series for fast action, wild weapons, clever vehicles, online teamwork, and videocard-straining visuals. *Unreal Tournament* stood alone and triumphant, with *Quake* under its boot, *Counter-Strike* practically in a whole other genre, *Joint Operations* a dirty little secret, and *Battlefield* socked in by fog. But slick and stylish speed shooters aren't so scarce anymore. These days, *UT* feels relatively superficial, even when it tries new gimmicks like the mobile artillery from the bonus pack or the Necris Nightshade's deployable items. These are too little, too late, and too me-too.

The online support disappoints, with very little in the way of achievements or persistent stats. The friends list isn't very friendly, and the server browser might as well scream for you to get off its lawn. Setting up LAN games or bot skirmishes is frustrating, limited, and counterintuitive. Decking out your avatar with unlockable bits of clothing is so very EA. It's still a good game—lovely, and a little tired. But these days, even a favorite old dog like *UT* needs to learn more than a few new tricks. • **Tom Chick**

VERDICT

- **Good visuals; great map design; Darkwalkers!**
- **Feels very *2004*.**

6/10

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● *Kane & Lynch* features several "rail" sequences where gameplay becomes even simpler...and the A.I. becomes even dopier. It's like playing bizarro *Half-Life*.

KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN

If only this were Movieline...

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **IO Interactive** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Hate cops? *Kane & Lynch*'s designers sure hope so—butchering pork is a major pastime for the titular "heroes" of this third-person shooter from IO Interactive. Of course, you'll kill plenty of criminals, too. And civilians. And security guards. Hell, kill everybody—that's what this game's all about.

EMPATHY WAS YESTERDAY

Well, it's not *all* about screaming one-eight-seven on a motherf**ter: *K&L* sports a surprisingly gripping storyline, imaginative scenarios, and plenty of snappy four-letter dialogue. Nevertheless, the heart of the *K&L* experience is making those shell casings ping-ping-ping off the floor. And whether it's psychotic Lynch offing hostages in a sudden freak-out or brutal Kane gunning down Tokyo clubgoers during a kidnapping, *K&L* offers plenty of opportunities to scratch that itchy trigger finger.

The secret ingredient, though, isn't the raw slaughter, but the game's many sharp set pieces—*K&L*'s missions rely on clever settings to provide that extra kick in the ass. A desperate gunfight following a botched bank robbery (an obvious homage to Michael Mann's *Heat*); rappelling down the face of a skyscraper for a through-the-window assassination; busting through concrete barriers in a balls-to-the-wall prison break—it's almost enough to make you think you're in the middle of a movie.

THE ACTION IS THE JUICE

Thing is, you're *not*. Exciting as cinematic set pieces are, *K&L* is a game, not a film. By that standard, it fails to do what a game should do: provide you with meaningful choices and tests of skill. Instead, for all its flash and flutter, the action poses virtually no challenge. Simply wait for enemies to pop out from cover, put the reticule across their mugs, and press the left mouse button. Lather, rinse, repeat. Because of the essentially unlimited ammo, and because enemy A.I. is about as sharp as G-flat major, all the cinematic dazzle quickly falls by the wayside, and

> IT FAILS TO DO WHAT A GAME SHOULD DO: PROVIDE YOU WITH MEANINGFUL CHOICES AND TESTS OF SKILL.

you find yourself slogging through one point-and-click moronfest after another to advance the story.

The multiplayer (powered by Games for Windows Live) doesn't do much to amend the problem. A co-op/deathmatch hybrid called "Fragile Alliance" is the sole game mode. Matches start with players working together against the A.I. but increasingly encourage them to betray and kill each other for a bigger share of the score. It sounds nifty on paper, but with *K&L*'s simplistic gameplay mechanics, figuring out when to betray whom is child's play...and the whole thing eventually gets monotonous. Multiple roles—or other aspects beyond shooting everyone in sight—would've done wonders here.

YOU ARE GOIN' DOWN

K&L serves as an important lesson in game design: The medium isn't the message. The game's still entertaining, especially if you're looking to play on a casual basis...but with rumors of a film adaptation already in the works, I can't help but wonder if the designers were more focused on another Hollywood vehicle instead of a solid game. ● **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

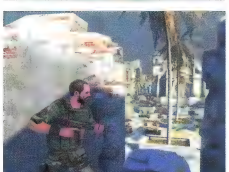
+ Fantastic graphics, nonstop action; great "cinematic" feel.

– Repetitive gameplay; limited multiplayer; too simplistic.

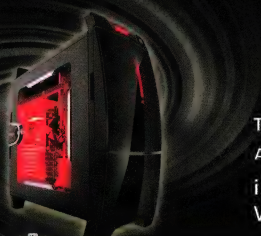
5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows



● **Your foes aren't Rhodes Scholar material, so it's pretty easy to flank around and waste 'em.**



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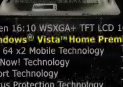

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VIVA PIÑATA

Candy land

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Rare GENRE: Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box USER RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.4GHz CPU, 256 RAM, 10GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Env

REVIEW

Picture yourself in a colorful, fresh world of papier-mâché. Piñata animals with tasty names thrive among exotic plants. Even better: Money is made of chocolate, and the worst villains are the ones who break piñatas. Welcome to the offbeat world of strategy/sim game (and Xbox 360 port) *Viva Piñata*.

Long ago, Jardinero—the best gardener on Piñata Island—retired, leaving his garden abandoned until it became a mess. As the new gardener, it's your duty to fill those dirt-covered boots by growing fabulous plants, attracting cool piñatas to live and romance in your garden, and keeping away the nasty Sours. As the less-than-encouraging Jardinero himself often comments, this is harder than it seems (my self-esteem took a hit from remarks such as "You are now an Expert Gardener. I myself reached that goal in my first day in the garden."). The farther you progress, the more of the story you unlock; the "Storybook" feature lets you access chapters of the story from your handy-dandy Journal without interfering with your gardening. The odd story forms a good foundation, but it isn't so involved that it overwhelms the gameplay.

To play, you can either use an Xbox 360 controller or a mouse and keyboard. The mouse/keyboard felt very awkward, as if I were playing a console game with PC controls. The 360 controller's smooth layout is definitely preferable.

TIME SINK

Once you get past the control issues, *Viva Piñata* is very addictive. I frequently found myself getting so absorbed in the game that a couple of hours would pass, during which I'd forget all about my homework (just ask my mother). As long as you have a goal to accomplish, it's hard to stop—and it's pretty tough to *not* have any goals. You can always find another piñata to tame or romance, another plant to grow, and so on. Don't get overwhelmed if a lot of things happen too quickly at the beginning; at the time, it bothered me...but later, I found that this gave me more freedom and challenges with my garden. Occasionally, I *would* get bored or frustrated for chunks of time, but that was when I knew it was time to take a break. My main problem was that romancing the piñatas (this leads to the creation of new piñatas) felt confusing: At the beginning, it's easy...but later, the piñatas start getting pickier and refuse to romance, even those in happy moods and with all their requirements completed.

> GET TISSUES, TOO: IT'S HARD NOT TO GET TEARY WHEN A SYRUPENT EATS YOUR MOUSEMALLOW.

Overall, *Viva Piñata* is a must for the "*Sims* generation," the 9-to-13-ish kids who don't enjoy violent games—they'll definitely fall in love with the piñatas. If you get *Viva Piñata* for your kids, make sure to get tissues, too; it's hard not to get teary when a Syrupent eats your Mousemallow. Also, adults shouldn't dismiss this as a "kiddie game," as you might be surprised at how much strategy's involved. *Viva Piñata* is a great escape from both standard violent games *and* reality.

• **Sarah Jaisser Green**

VERDICT

- **Very addictive; deceptively strategy-oriented.**
- **Wonky mouse/keyboard controls scream "plug in a gamepad already!"**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

• **So cute and colorful, it hurts.**

GFW RADIO

Games for Windows

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1UP NETWORK

Beaming bad guys down from spaceships is a nice change from enemies just sort of popping into existence for no adequately explained reason.

Few things in life are more satisfying than thumping a giant spider in the nose with a rifle butt.

It just isn't an alien invasion until the Striders show up.

"At this particular moment in time, I don't believe I have a healthier or more deeply felt respect for any object in the universe than this here shotgun."

TABULA RASA

Quid quid Latine dictum sit, altum videtur* (*Anything said in Latin sounds profound)

PUBLISHER: NCsoft DEVELOPER: NCsoft GENRE: MMORPG AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: Online-only VERSION REVIEWED: Live v6.0.3.4

IT'S HARD TO KNOCK A FORMULA THAT WORKS. BUT WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE.

REVIEW

"Tabula rasa," for those with rusty Latin, means "clean slate." Which might lead one to expect something truly new from legendary designer Richard Garriott's *Tabula Rasa*—and makes it a little startling when the game turns out to be such a color-by-numbers MMO. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but you can cut the irony with a knife.

TR's *Starship Troopers*–ish setting does a lot to set the game apart from its peers. We haven't had a really solid sci-fi MMO in ages, and *TR* is the best one out there right now. That is, however, a purely aesthetic difference; the nuts and bolts still haven't changed much. Whether you call them "Boargars" or "Boaroids," we're still questing to kill 10 boars for our next armor upgrade. We're hunting down X of Y, running across the world to talk to Z, and collecting giant spider spleens or...whatever. It's hard to knock a formula that works, but we've been here before.

WAR IS THE H-WORD

The game's major departure from expectation is in presenting itself as a kind of MMO/shooter hybrid. It looks an awful lot like one, but that isn't entirely the case. You're running around with guns, sure—but success has little to do with aiming or reflexes and everything to do with equipment and die rolls. That doesn't disappoint, either: We get a fantastic simulation of an action-oriented ray-gun firefight. If you squint a bit, the presentation might almost convince you that the combat has more in common with *Gears of War* than with *EverQuest*.

Call it a healthy sense of battlefield chaos: You're not left with a bunch of mobs standing around at their spawn points looking bored until they dumbly rush anyone that walks into aggro range. Instead, you get blasted terrain, into which alien dropships teleport squads of grunts—who immediately start picking fights with players and NPCs while mortar bombardments occasionally send groups of combatants flying. I can't overstate how viscerally satisfying it is to run, dive, crouch behind cover, and pump shotgun rounds into throngs of aliens. The combat—and its success in fostering the illusion of run-and-gun action within the framework of an RPG—is easily *TR*'s strongest point, and it's the kind of thing that's never been executed this well or this completely in an MMO. In its guts, *TR*'s still far more of an RPG than an action game...but it can pass for the latter if you want it to.

CONNECT THE DOTS

The other "creative" touches are mostly inconsequential. Moral choices presented via quests are infrequent, and your decisions never have much impact (deciding whether to turn in or shelter a conscientious objector earns a different choice of loot that you'll immediately pawn...and nobody ever mentions the incident again). The Logos language, which consists of collect-em-all pictograms necessary to use certain skills, sounds much more interesting than it is: Your character's skills are described by sentences stitched together from these pictograms, but you never actually have to learn or use the language yourself. Mostly it just presents a minor obstacle, requiring you to visit a few locations to fetch the appropriate Logos so you can cast whatever spell you're interested in.

• It's a scientifically proven fact that swords are at least 10 times more effective when in the hands of a hot chick.

Compared to how satisfying all the running, shooting, and kicking the heads off of aliens are, the noncombat activities in the game fall pretty flat. The crafting system departs from the "learn by doing" model of just about every other MMO out there; instead, your crafting skills advance through point investment. It's a change I would welcome if crafting skills didn't draw from the same pool of ability points as combat skills. That—coupled with very few items that are worth crafting in the first place and an anemic in-game economy—paints the entire crafting system as something of an afterthought. It doesn't do any good, other than to piss off the occasional newbie who doesn't know better than to try it out.

My chief concern is *TR*'s longevity. At present, the game offers maybe three or four months of content. With little in the way of engaging PVP, useful item crafting, or other distractions for veterans who've hit the level cap and cleared out all their quests, the game could easily fade away. On the other hand, the unique combat, interesting setting, and promise of future content updates make it a worthwhile purchase for that subset of MMO players who are sick to death of high fantasy and dial-a-combo combat. **• Scott Sharkey**

VERDICT

- **Could almost convince you that you're playing a massively multiplayer shooter.**
- **Risks alienating players who want actual shooting—or RPG fans who don't.**

6.5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

EVERQUEST II: RISE OF KUNARK

A nice shellac job on a seasoned classic

PUBLISHER: **Sony Online Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Sony Online Entertainment** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (store.station.sony.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, *EverQuest II*** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

When *EverQuest* was the biggest kid in town, Sony Online Entertainment pumped out expansions like crazy. "Every six months" became the company mantra. Then, when *EverQuest II* faced a nearly simultaneous release against *World of WarCraft*, the stakes became higher—especially when the 800-pound gorilla nearly elbowed every other MMO right out of the playground. As *EQ2*'s fourth official expansion, *Rise of Kunark* comes closer than any of its predecessors to realizing the product's initial intent: to raise the technological bar while appealing to a new, more casual player base. Although longtime, die-hard *EverQuest* fans still refer to *EQ2* as "the dumbing down of Norrath," it remains a squishier—but still very intricate—game that works pretty well. Especially now.

After three expansions, three Adventure Packs, one collectible card game, and a bunch of free downloadable content, SOE devoted an unprecedented full year to polishing *Rise of Kunark*. Although midlevel content is completely absent (*Rise* offers little to do between levels 21 and 64), the added areas are expansive, with scads of new quests—many of which you can solo or duo. In fact, most of the overland areas are completely soloable, without the social mob groupings against which a single player stands no chance whatsoever. You can finally just go in and have fun for a while, something MMOs rarely offer.

> YOU CAN FINALLY JUST GO IN AND HAVE FUN FOR A WHILE. SOMETHING MMOS RARELY OFFER.

SMOOTHLY INTEGRATED

New zones contain other zones, and the resulting audiovisual layering makes the world seem more grounded than ever, without that jarring "take two steps east—ooooh, scary; take two steps west—ooooh, tranquil" sort of feeling. It's also evident that the designers spent a lot of time making the high-end quest lines work in context instead of slapping them on at the last moment. Old fans will be thrilled to see revamped areas such as the former Iksar capital Sebilis, Karnor's Castle (one of the earliest dungeons in *EverQuest: Ruins of Kunark*), and Veeshan's Peak—a truly spectacular raid area where the Ring of Scale (which has held court there since the beginning of time) is undergoing a disturbing transition.

The Sarnak, the fabulous, tall, dragonlike humanoids who were nearly driven to extinction by the Iksar in *EQ1*, return as a new player race, but the story of their war with the Spiroc (whom old *EQ*ers will remember from the Plane of Sky) seems forced and fabricated. It's not clear how the game's overall Iksar threat affects these new-age Sarnak: "Why am I hitting that bird?" The high-level content, however, beautifully relates just what's up with those zany Iksar. Oh, and the Sarnak newbie area is as great looking as all the others, and the new city of Gorowyn is intuitively laid out and much easier to navigate than Boston, Rome, or Seattle.

The year of development shaped *Rise of Kunark* into an admirable expansion. Even though PVP content is largely ignored and mid-range characters will level elsewhere, it's apparent that SOE's finally hatched an add-on that puts a shine on the entire game. ● **Cindy Yans**

VERDICT

- **Knockout visuals; good zone structure; solo-friendly; return of classic *EQ* locations.**
- **No midlevel content; minimal customization for new race; no love for PVPers.**

9/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows

● **We can discuss this kindly...or not.**

Make them mobs sparkle, boys.

FINAL FANTASY XI: WINGS OF THE GODDESS

Stuck in time

PUBLISHER: Square Enix | DEVELOPER: Square Enix | GENRE: MMORPG | AVAILABILITY: Retail | ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2500MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, *Final Fantasy XI* (gamepad recommended) | MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale | VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

It seems like every *Final Fantasy XI* expansion is a reaction to the previous one. *Chains of Promathia* was a pain in the ass, and *Treasures of Aht Urhgan* was an overly generous cakewalk by comparison. But *Treasures* came with its own problems, such as a still-broken mass-scale conflict event called Besieged, which suffers from fun-destroying latency issues and overcrowding. *Wings of the Goddess* addresses this concern by taking the Besieged concept and spreading it out all over *FFXI*'s world of Vana'diel in an effort to make it more manageable. The expansion also provides an entirely new world for players to romp around in.

Detractors might say that *Wings*' contribution in opening up an anachronous 20-years-past version of Vana'diel allowed the developers to fashion a huge new playground while repurposing many already-existing assets—which somewhat blunts the impact and excitement of the "new" areas. Enthusiasts might say this provides players a deeper look at the mythology and the characters that *FFXI* veterans have come to know and love. Both arguments have merit, which leads us directly to the low quantity of available quests, missions, and activities available to players since the game's November 2007 launch. It seems like Square Enix was either: a) in a hurry to get this one out in time to make the fiscal report; or b) satisfied to release an unfinished product, with the intention of doling out the goods through giant patches. In the console world, this would be called "an unfinished game," but in the PC world, it apparently means "boxed copy." Unfortunately, in the case of *Wings*' multiplatform releases, both console and PC players receive the same so-so experience.

The good news: The aforementioned Campaign Battles (the new, ever-occurring, small-scale skirmishes against the game's Beastman armies) are incredibly fun, with tons of NPC allies to help round things out in case live players aren't gathered in your particular territory. Minibosses and a consistent flow of foot soldiers offer battle fodder, experience points, and reputation boosts. Battling these armies in Vana'diel's familiar-yet-weathered sights adds a weary gravity to the experience, in a good way.

CLASS CLOWNS

The two new job classes—Dancer and Scholar—are head-scratchingly uneven. The Dancer is a powerful solo and group support job that addresses the game's need for a new tank class, while the Scholar is a third-tier healer/nuker during everything but the game's highest levels. Future balancing might improve the Scholar's place in *FFXI*...but for now, it's the center-halfback of mage classes. Not the best nuker, not the best healer, but able to switch between both roles on the fly.

Wings of the Goddess' overall worth in the *FFXI* canon is a bit muddy; after clearing the game's mere handful of missions in the first day after release, I found the overall experience lacking. Square Enix ought to try shipping a more complete game the next time around. ● **James Mielke**

VERDICT

- **New jobs are fun; Campaign Battles make up for the last expansion's busted Besieged mode.**
- **No excuse for shipping an unfinished game.**

5.5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

● **Dance the night away.**

BATTLING THESE ARMIES IN VANA'DIEL'S FAMILIAR-YET-WEATHERED SIGHTS ADDS A WEARY GRAVITY TO THE EXPERIENCE

● **This space for rent: Rather than write parody ads, Midway uses omnipresent billboard space to repeatedly name-check itself.**

BLACKSITE: AREA 51

The man behind the barrel

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Midway Studios Austin** GENRE: **First Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **3GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 15GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Gav**

REVIEW

Call of Duty 4's move from World War II to modern theaters is daring—or so reviewers wrote. On the one hand, you'd hear them argue that too much Axis-versus-Allies material risks diminishing returns (since publisher Activision already released seven *COD*-branded shooters). This logic seems to suggest that the series had nothing to lose. On the other hand, they had to have forgotten that the *Battlefield* games went from M1s to M16s; that *SOCOM* and *Conflict: Desert Storm* and *Close Combat: First to Fight* and *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* and *Soldier of Fortune* and *Ghost Recon* and god knows how many others proved that 1990-to-present-day and the Middle East are as profitable whens and wheres as 1944 Normandy. Most of these—*COD4* included—are wishy-washy with place names. Some make up Middle Eastern– or Central Asian–sounding states. *BlackSite: Area 51* is blunt from the beginning: We're now entering Iraq.

Given the ongoing war, this decision *is* daring. It's insensitive, too—but in ways that movies and comic books made while America was at war in the 1940s weren't: We're not just watching *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* or reading *Captain America*—we're the ones shooting. And *BlackSite*—which borrows its name from CIA secret detention centers—is subversive; an antiwar war game that not only puts its thumb precisely on the operations map, but that also portrays U.S. soldiers as victims subjected to experimentation and the scheming of politicians who one character calls "chickens***." *BlackSite* writers Harvey Smith (*Deus Ex*) and Susan O'Connor (*Gears of War*, *BioShock*) want us to think about the ways that America arms and trains its future foes. At the same time, the game's developers absolutely rely on their audience's desire to blow up idiots who hide behind powder kegs. That's weird. Weirder than any attempts to tie Roswell, New Mexico, to Gitmo and Abu Ghraib.

BLACKSITE THE NARRATIVE AND *BLACKSITE* THE GAME NEVER MEET IN THE MIDDLE.

BlackSite the narrative and *BlackSite* the game never meet in the middle. The story is what it is, and the part you play is made up of the most unsophisticated shooting money can buy. So while we're supposed to react to cynical episodes called "Stay the Course" and "The Surge," we aren't expected to open doors without the direction of icons we interact with in order to call over squadmates, who then open the doors. The circularity is comical. Touching a turret unleashes an endless torrent of opposing forces that walk into its line of fire. An ally yells to "close that tunnel with C4! That'll stop them." Clicking the icon causes you to command the very same ally who commanded you to close the tunnel to come over and close the tunnel. Confused yet? I was, too...and I wonder whether *BlackSite* might've made a great light-gun game—like the original *Area 51*—and gone to taverns and pool halls across middle America. Now *that's* daring. ● **Shawn Elliott**

● **Black Friday, *Area 51*: Strip mall sets abound.**

VERDICT

- **Suggestive story.**
- **Frequent stuttering; invisible walls; unsophisticated shooting.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE: PAYBACK

PUBLISHER: **Activision Value** DEVELOPER: **Activision** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3.3GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-12 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

Demonstrators abroad burn effigies of Bush. Americans produce Macromedia Flash games including *Bend Over Bin Laden*, *Fry Osama Bin Laden!*, *Hunt and Kill Bin Laden*, and *Blow Up Osama Bin Laden!!*. The defacement of voodoo dolls—whether they're digital or straw—is cathartic, understandable. But where knee-jerk revenge fantasies are fairly normal, long displays of righteous hatred risk losing their righteousness. Budget FPS *Soldier of Fortune: Payback* is still sticking pins.

Strip away *BlackSite: Area 51* and *Payback*'s stories, and you get the same formulaic game. Here, Arabs and Afghans cower behind combustible barrels or otherwise act out scripts that imperfectly predict players' actions. But as with the "Deface Bin Laden" series of Flash titles, what the terrorists do isn't important; it's what we do to them. The human body is to *Payback* what trees are to *Crysis*. Bullets break them at the point of impact, transforming people into vile confetti—and if one volley takes the legs from a man, another is needed to blow the head clean off his crawling trunk ("Enemies will not only react to the specific area they've been hit but also to the power of the weapon they've been hit with and will continue to fight until a final blow has been delivered," the game's promotional material boasts.) Five years ago, the sentiment might've made sense. Today, it's tasteless.

PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE: AMBITION OF ILLUMINUS

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Sonic Team** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 9GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

The original *Phantasy Star Online* was one of the very best *Diablo* clones, with addictive multiplayer and compact, easy-to-remember level layouts—which, in turn, encouraged the repeated loot-farming that defines a game of this type. *Phantasy Star Universe* messed with the formula by adding a fussy synthesis system, separating offline and online modes, and pushing a badly acted story mode that forced you to play as the game's bland principal character. Now, stand-alone *PSU* sequel *Ambition of Illuminus* addresses much of these qualms by finally allowing you to create your own hero to traverse through the offline plot, while (as with the first episode) online games use a server-stored online avatar. Not much has changed here, but some slight feature finessing and greater attention to the customizable portion of the game make *Illuminus* worth playing.

BEOWULF

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

If Dark Ages Denmark had hip-hop culture, and if that culture spawned a videogame (and if that game were really lame), then Ubisoft's *Beowulf* would be, like, 2,000 years old today! Forget technicalities like innovative design, a smooth graphics engine, and quality writing—all of which this game lacks. Instead, like a rap video, *Beowulf* wants you to focus on the continual, vociferous praise you receive from your crew—A.I. teammates called "Thanes." Since gameplay is both extremely simplistic and full of exploits (you can manipulate the counterattacking mechanic to generate virtually unlimited health, for example), your Thanes quickly come to worship you just for pressing X. It wears down your defenses: After a while, even the most jaded gamer will begin to feel like a Viking superstar. And then he'll remember he just dropped 50 bones for a lukewarm *God of War* rip-off and probably won't feel so great anymore.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

GRAB BAG

Chances are, you're probably not lacking good games to play, given the amazing lineup of 2007 holiday titles. But if you're just *that* much of a machine, here are five more to keep you occupied.

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

The *Hitman* series' chrome-domed antihero "47" takes on some wetwork in the good ol' US of A for a change in *Hitman: Blood Money*. Continuing the series' emphasis on open-ended missions, *Blood Money* charges you with punching somebody's ticket and then leaves you fairly free rein to get it done your way. Keeping things stealthy makes subsequent missions easier—but with new, upgradeable weaponry and the series' trademark snarky set design, making the bodies hit the floor is equally entertaining.

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Rayman mastermind Michel Ansel's quirky sci-fi action-adventure—which centers around a hot intergalactic photojournalist named Jade who investigates the local military faction's dirty dealings and uncovers a multilayered conspiracy—is the poster child for critically acclaimed retail flops. This underappreciated game got lost in the shuffle upon its release, thanks to a holiday launch, an inexplicably stupid name, and near-nonexistent marketing efforts. Check it out for yourself and see what a shame that is.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE TWO THRONES

The titular, time-tripping protagonist of Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia* revival trilogy has gone through a bit of an identity crisis, swinging from idealistic hero in the first game to angry, bitter hero in the second. Third chapter *Two Thrones* pulls it all together and puts that screwy second chapter in perspective for jaded fans. It also strikes a fine balance between combat and puzzles, making the most of the series parkour-like environmental brainteasers and adding a new set of brutal speed-kills to the Prince's stylish arsenal.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

After spending approximately nine years in development (across two publishers and two developers), the MMORPG formerly known as *Middle-earth Online* finally arrived in early 2007. And it *ruled*. The pessimists out there might call it a *World of WarCraft* clone—and maybe they're a little bit right—but no one can accuse *LOTRO* of treating J.R.R. Tolkien's lore with anything but the utmost respect. Jaded *WOW* vets won't find much to hold their attention for long, but Middle-earth fanatics finally get to explore an expertly realized version of their favorite fantasy world.

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

Big Huge Games' follow-up to the classic RTS *Rise of Nations* offers up three asymmetrical sides (yeah, we know you've heard that before), but the hook is its unique alt-fantasy flair. You've never seen anything like the steampunk Vinci, Mayan-inspired sci-fi Cuotl, and mystical Alin—at least, not together in the same game. Aside from the wild style, we also love the snap-on cities, area-of-influence mechanics, and rock-solid campaign.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

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INSIDE

CASUAL
Falling Pieces
This month's casual games column looks at a couple of fast-paced shoot-em-ups.

MMORPG
Crisis on Infinite Servers
MMO guilds: friends or business partners?

PODCAST
Sound Off
The *GFW* editors talk about vaporware and game delays that made them cry.

TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

GEARS OF WAR

It's not a strategy game, and it's not turn-based. Will Bruce survive?

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Epic Games** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **Mature**

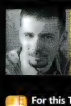
Bruce will be role-playing this character.

Tom and Bruce hit the mean streets of wherever *Gears of War* is supposed to take place. Decatur? Spokane? Who knows.

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

For this Tom vs. Bruce, Ziff Davis hired Alec Baldwin, the narrator of *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *World in Conflict*. You can get these guys cheap during a writers' strike.

Tom is an old hand at shooters. He played Gears of War *on the Xbox 360. He even beat General RAAM without having to look up the solution on GameFAQs. The last shooter Bruce tried to play was* Half-Life, *and he gave up after 15 minutes when he couldn't figure out how to put the hazard suit on. Tom thinks* Gears *co-op campaign on the PC would be a way to ease Bruce into the genre, like running a guildie through Blackrock Depths using a level 70 character, except without loot drops.*

BRUCE: Is this like that Greek fighting game? I heard that was good.
TOM: That was *God of War*. This is *Gears of War*. They're both about men with massive torsos, but they're otherwise not related.

In order to play, Bruce has to create a profile on Games for Windows Live. He settles on the name "SpaceRumsfeld." Tom uses his own Xbox Live account, "tomchick." He privately thinks Bruce got the better deal when it comes to clever Internet names. Bruce elects to play the main character, even though he can't tell Dom from Baird, much less remember the lead character's name.

TOM: It's Marcus Fenix. It's edgy because you don't spell it the normal way. If we were playing *BlackSite: Area 51*, your character's name would be Aeran Pierce, spelled just like that. Now that's edgy.
BRUCE: You may not know this, but this is actually the second game ever made that starts you out by being released from a prison cell. I played the other one, too, which is called *Oblivion*.
TOM: Lots of games start you out by being released from a prison cell.
BRUCE: Not that I know of. None of the *Heroes of Might and Magic* games did that.
TOM: I'm pretty sure *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* starts you out being released from a prison cell.
BRUCE: I said games, not simulators.
TOM: Next to shipwrecks, prisons are perfect game intros to explain why your starting weapon sucks. You can't just get out of prison with a torque bow. Same with a shipwreck. When you're swimming for your life, you're lucky to keep a pistol tucked in your belt.
BRUCE: OK, so I need to go through the little training exercise just to see how you and I work together. This is more of a team-building exercise for us. Wait, the dialogue at the beginning said we were going back the way you got in, but all these doors are locked. How did you get in if the doors are locked?
TOM: They're one-way doors. Prisons are designed to keep people from breaking out, not breaking in.

Once he's perused the manual and satisfied himself that there is no bunny-hopping key, Bruce comes to a security door. To get past it, you have to shoot the circuit breakers. This teaches you that you can interact with certain parts of the environment by shooting them. Later, there will be door-kicking and valve-turning lessons, but for now, it's just the shooting.

BRUCE: Let me shoot the breakers! Wait, there's a bug. The door isn't opening.
TOM: You have to shoot the other breaker.
BRUCE: I did.
TOM: No, you didn't.
BRUCE: That isn't a breaker?
TOM: Not the thing you keep trying to shoot.
BRUCE: Then the other breaker is missing. >

TOM: It's right there. Where I'm looking. That's a breaker, just like the other one you shot.
BRUCE: I don't even exactly know what the first one is. You can't expect me to be an expert on what all made-up things from the future look like.
TOM: Please shoot the other breaker or I'm going to do it.
BRUCE: I'm out of ammo.
TOM: I can see that.

Because this pace puts them on target for the Games for Windows' *end-of-year roundup issue for 2009, Tom decides to change the plan. They will run through Act Five, which consists of all-new content for the PC. They quit out so Bruce can host a new game. Along the way, Tom explains to Bruce the story so far.*

TOM: And there's something about a bomb on a train.
BRUCE: So we're disarming it.
TOM: No, no, we're driving it underground because of, well, I'm not really clear on all the particulars. Look out for that guy.
BRUCE: I died. Can you rez me?
TOM: OMW.

Being new to shooters, Bruce has many questions.

BRUCE: So, is this a good game? Like a really good shooter game?
TOM: It was last year.
BRUCE: How could you tell? Because it was made by Cliffy B?
TOM: I guess you could say it's more realistic.
BRUCE: This is how it really will be in the future?
TOM: I wouldn't rule it out. Mainly, I mean it's more tactical. You have to use tactics like flanking, taking advantage of cover, and playing the reloading minigame. These were new back in the olden days of 2006.
BRUCE: Is this what they mean when they say a shooter is "on-rails"?
TOM: Not technically. That means you have no choice about where to go. Remember how we had to split up to get through the theater level?
BRUCE: You mean the fact that I had to go up to the balcony means the game is not "on-rails"?
TOM: Yes. That officially makes *Gears* nonlinear.
BRUCE: What is that music that keeps playing? It sounds like someone has a guitar or something. Can I change weapons to my guitar?
TOM: That's the rock riff that tells us we've cleared the area.
BRUCE: So the power of music is used against monsters in this game, too? Did they rip that off from *The Lord of the Rings Online?*
TOM: You ain't seen nothing yet. Next month, we'll play *Elite Beat Agents.*

Gears of War was originally developed for the Xbox 360. It was the fastest-selling 360 game of 2006. With a 93.8 percent on Gamerankings, it was the fourth highest-rated game of the year. New Line Cinema has a film adaptation in the works. Get Gears of War *for Windows at a retailer near you for the manufacturer's suggested retail price of $49.99.* Gears of War *is rated M for Mature.*

BRUCE: Who is that guy?
TOM: He's in *30 Rock*. Do you watch that?
BRUCE: Is that a shooter?
TOM: Did you see *Glengarry Glen Ross*? He's the "put the coffee down" guy. Do that line, Alec.

Put that coffee down. Coffee is for closers.

BRUCE: I got killed. Can you rez me?
TOM: This isn't really a game about running and gunning, so you're not dashing around trying to hit moving targets. You're instead waiting for the right moment. With a mouse, it's easy to position your reticule at just the right spot for a headshot every time. It's almost like the developers didn't know how easy it was going to be on a PC.
BRUCE: I got killed again.
TOM: Well, easy for everyone but you. It's also easy to tag the perfect reload. If you hit the reload button again when the gauge is on the sweet spot, your clip will do extra damage. Add this to all the headshots I'm getting and we'll be at the end in no time.
BRUCE: I died again. The same guy killed me, even though I was shooting him.
TOM: One of the weird things about *Gears of War* is that you're a crazy big, supertough marine, but it takes forever to kill a Locust with your default assault rifle. You're hitting a big nasty alien with your gun, and gouts of blood are splashing off him like he's loaded with squibs the size of watermelons. But it seems to take a couple of clips to actually drop the guy. So you feel kind of weak. It's enough to make you miss those one-shot/one-kill games like *Rainbow Six* and *Unreal Tournament*.
BRUCE: It takes forever to level up in this game. Still haven't changed.
TOM: One of the drawbacks of playing on the PC is the framerate, which screeches to the low single digits in several places. We can just take cover until it blows over. Hey, have you used the chain saw?
BRUCE: How do I use the chain saw?
TOM: OK, make sure you have your assault rifle equipped. Now hold down the F key and run up to a monster. Then hit the fire button and you'll slice him up. It's pretty cool.
BRUCE: I got killed.
TOM: Maybe you're not ready for the chain saw.

Throughout the game, Tom and Bruce are the victims of intermittent crashes. Actually, Bruce is the victim of the crashes, and Tom is the victim of Bruce crashing, since Bruce is hosting the game.

BRUCE: I crashed again. I don't remember any of the other games we've played crashing this much.
TOM: I'm pretty sure we're crashing because of Games for Window Live, which I hate for reasons beyond the crashing. To play *Gears of Wars* online in anything other than matches against random yahoos, you need a Gold account, which is just a fancy way of saying a "pay Microsoft an annual fee" account. It's enough to make me like all the other annoying multiplayer services like Xfire, Steam, Ubi.com, and GameSpy Comrade, none of which tries to bill me. But at least I'm adding to my Xbox Live gamerscore while I'm playing *Gears* for Windows.
BRUCE: Does Xbox Live crash all the time, too? Maybe this is a simulation of what it is like to have an Xbox.
TOM: No, that would mean you'd have to send your PC to Microsoft every few weeks to get a replacement. OK, we're near the end. You ready?

The Brumak is a giant monster with guns on his arms, a rocket launcher on his neck, and a soldier riding on his head. He has 16 eyes. He's like something you drew in your notebook in junior high. To defeat him, you have to shoot the guns off his arms, then shoot his feet to knock him down, then quickly shoot his rider before the Brumak gets back up.

BRUCE: I'm not sure about this part. We were supposed to restore the power to get the drawbridge back up, right? And now that we did that, someone just told me that "power levels are good, but we need to jump the polarity transformers."
TOM: You're not supposed to pay attention to all that. It's just a bunch of hoo-ha to get you to the next level of shooting things.
BRUCE: There isn't anything we need to figure out? We don't have to deduce anything or solve a puzzle to thwart the girl robot voice?
TOM: This isn't like that.
BRUCE: This game might need more cut-scenes to explain that science-y stuff. I feel like I'm not getting the most out of the story. Like why those whelps attacked us.
TOM: Those were wretches, not whelps.
BRUCE: So they don't give me any DKP?
TOM: Not that I'm aware of.
BRUCE: Then why bother killing them?
TOM: Because in shooters, you have to kill all the monsters or you can't go on to the next monster. It's why the guitar plays to let you know all the monsters here are dead, so it's time to go to the next set. The giant thing with the rocket launchers that keeps chasing us is the last set.
BRUCE: Still, this is going to be tough, right? It's a boss monster fight? I've heard about how those are always tough.
TOM: Yeah, it's a screwy puzzle kind of thing, like Alec explained. Can you go over that again, Alec?

You have to shoot the guns off his arms, then shoot his feet to knock him down, and then quickly shoot his rider before the Brumak gets back up.

BRUCE: That sounds really complicated. Is anything special going to happen after that?
TOM: No, that's pretty much it.
BRUCE: No phone number at the end so you can call CliffyB and tell him we won?
TOM: Those were simpler times.
BRUCE: Now you just get a happy creepy song.
TOM: Like I said, this isn't that.
BRUCE: I could tell that from the writing. ●

WINNER:
ALEC BALDWIN

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

Casual gaming is in a rut rivaling the Mariana Trench. Visit the usual sites and you'll see countless match-three games, *Diner Dash* clones, and more hidden-object games than there are actual objects in the world to hide. Despairing that I wouldn't find anything exciting, I downloaded *Taskforce: The Mutants of October Morgane*, hoping against hope that it would deliver at least a sliver of the delicious *X-COM* gameplay it promised. In reality, it delivered repeated crashes and thudding boredom. With that, I dialed down my lofty hopes and found two games that lacked any real ambition but delivered the sort of addictive enjoyment that distinguishes the better casual games.

> CASUAL GAMING IS IN A RUT RIVALING THE MARIANA TRENCH.

Bullet Candy and *Neon Wars* are candy-colored arcade shooters that embrace a *Geometry Wars*–meets-*Asteroids*-on-meth style of play. Both of these games let you pilot a vulnerable little spacecraft in an uncomfortably confined swath of deep space, where waves upon waves of laser-spitting attackers swarm your ship, forcing you to flee constantly. Both titles derive a great deal of their satisfaction by providing numerous near-death experiences and frenzied escapes in every session. Of the two, *Bullet Candy* is the only one that lets you control the targeting of your weapons; in contrast, *Neon Wars*' besieged spaceship fires on nearby enemies automatically while you focus on using the mouse to escape and dodge.

While *Neon Wars* might sound less involving as a result, I actually found the tighter focus more engaging and manageable; in *Bullet Candy*, it's very hard to recognize your ship with your attention divided between two tasks, thus resulting in some frustrating deaths. *Neon Wars* also has more interesting power-ups and special-attack options. Each game costs $20 at www.reflexive.com and (fingers crossed) should keep you busy until something more refreshing comes along.

While it looks delicious, you are advised against actually eating *Bullet Candy*.

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CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: Committed

COLUMN

Ryan Scott

Ryan is the leader of the newly-formed Task Force X on *WOW's* Deathwing server. Feel free to prove him wrong.

"Chicken Tenders is now recruiting! We are a new guild accepting members of all levels. We have a guild bank, tabard, and lots of nice guildies. We do Battlegrounds, run instances, and quest together, and we are gonna start raiding Karazhan pretty soon. We are looking for more nice players to help the guild grow fast, and to have fun together. All are welcome! PST for info."

Chances are you've probably seen *many* messages like this in the general and trade chat channels of whatever MMO(s) you happen to play. Perhaps if you're a fresh-out-of-the-account-creation-screen newcomer to these sorts of games, the rush of open guild invites seems warm and welcoming. After all, you want somewhere to belong, right? Somewhere that appreciates you for *you*?

For jaded, grumpy, get-the-hell-off-my-virtual-lawn-you-damn-newbe blowhards like me, guild invite spam is a bright red flag. Unfiltered enrollment leads to what I term "Zerg guilds": masses of immature idiots, all with different goals and agendas, and most looking out for their own interests above all else. These guilds might mold themselves into effective teams, but they aren't *families*, per se—outside of whatever nightly raid you happen to sign up for, guild chat is largely just another channel for the kids to unleash streams of profanity and hilarious Chuck Norris jokes.

● **The 25-man raid: the death of the tight-knit guild.**

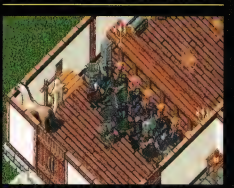
FORTH THE HAND

Here's a story about a guild from the *good old days*: Back in 1999, I applied for membership in a fairly infamous guild on *Ultima Online*'s Pacific server called The Black Hand (or BH, for short). BH had a reputation as a merciless PVP-oriented guild, with an all-for-one philosophy and a very close-knit relationship among its comparatively modest member base. As a prospective member, I underwent a weeks-long getting-to-know-you period, followed by a verbal interview (the Inquisition, we called it) to gauge the limits of an initiate's loyalty. Membership required a unanimous vote among every active guild member; a single "no" vote was all it took to deny an applicant—no questions asked. It was a strict, effective policy that guaranteed extreme trust, dedication, and unity on an emotional level. A BH title above your head *meant* something. And, as my one-time guildmaster once succinctly noted to new members, "If you call for help in this guild, don't be surprised if like nine people show up." That's commitment for commitment's sake.

Nowadays, those guilds are gone. Quantity trumps quality, and every MMO from *World of WarCraft* to *Guild Wars* sends the same message, loud and clear: *Smaller guilds are second-class guilds. Join the herd or get left behind.* So it is that the Zerg guilds mobilize predominantly for the accumulation of phat loot (the *one true* be-all, end-all goal), while the Black Hands of the world—the players who stood together because they felt they'd found other people of *quality* with whom to spend their gaming hours—wither and die. Not racing to clear the Black Temple? That retribution Paladin over yonder's got no time to waste on you; he's got epics to grind. Sure, he can hardly stand most of his 80 other guildmates (three-quarters of whom he doesn't know from Adam)...but if you can't do anything to up his all-important DPS number and they *can*, why should he bother joining your guild—close-knit or not?

Even the guilds that craft careful mission statements and recruitment policies only parse the word "quality" in a how-good-are-your-stats manner, with little consideration for chemistry or other social intangibles. Applying to one of these organizations amounts to the text-chat equivalent of a job interview: a clinical, number-crunching, so-what-can-you-do-for-us affair. You're only worth as much as you bring to the weekly 25-man raid, and if you're not committed enough to *that* cause...well, we've got plenty of other applicants in the queue. Next in line, please?

● **"NOW RECRUITING 4 GEEZERS LOL! FREE GOLD 4 NE1 WHO SINES MUH GUILD CHARTER ROFL."**



● **See this? Now *this* was a freakin' guild. There's nothing like having 10 guys appear from out of nowhere any time you had a problem.**

THE MESSAGE IS LOUD AND CLEAR: SMALLER GUILDS ARE SECOND-CLASS GUILDS. JOIN THE HERD OR GET LEFT BEHIND.

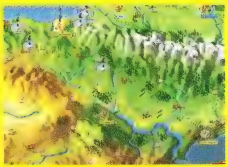
LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is GFW's resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.



● Napoleon himself would be proud of the graphical treatment.

AGEOD is a weird name for a French developer that most people haven't heard of. But war gamers should care—because over the course of just a couple years, AGEOD hit upon an elegant system depicting 18th- and 19th-century warfare, and the developer's latest game is one of its best.

Having tackled the American Revolution and the American Civil War, AGEOD moves on to the Napoleonic Wars with *Napoleon's Campaigns*, which covers each of the major campaigns from 1805 to 1815, including the whole Peninsular War. Mirroring history, each individual campaign acts as a stand-alone scenario—meaning you can't play through the whole 1805-1815 period as one long, extended game. In that sense, this is a true war game, without political or economic rules to tie the whole period together. Because Napoleonic political rules are so hard to get right (see West *Civ*'s *Crown of Glory* or the board game *Empires in Arms*), this might be a blessing in disguise.

Napoleon's Campaigns also furthers AGEOD's reputation for making really *beautiful* games. *Birth of America* was the company's first game with this style of presentation, but this game goes way beyond that—it's probably the best-looking computer war game of its kind. Napoleonic games depend so much on the pageantry of the period that any game that gets this part right starts out way ahead.

The big complaint gamers might have is the way tactical battles are handled automatically by the A.I. and presented to the player for *a posteriori* analysis. When so much that is attractive about Napoleonic warfare is wrapped up in the battles, the rest needs to be really compelling to make up for it. *NC* does a good job trying, and while I'm not a big fan of the amount of detail the game tracks, I still find myself drawn in. Find more info at www.ageod.com. ●

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Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

XTRAS

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THE CREW

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Every week, the editors of GFW toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the kinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by this month's monster Delay of Game feature (see page 16).

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Which game's cancellation crushed you the most?

SEAN: Usually a game's cancellation is cause for laughter and pointing, but I'm going to steal words out of Ryan's mouth before he even has a chance to speak and say that I was profoundly saddened when I learned that LucasArts' *Sam & Max* sequel was canned. Telltale's new episodic series is superladen and all, but knowing there's *Sam & Max* game content I'm never going to see is...well, I honestly think that cancellation went back in time and caused the Great Depression.

RYAN: YOU STOLE MINE. Anyway, Ultima Online 2's various cancellations bummed me out at the time. When the first UO2 details were divulged, I had this stupid, geeky story that would justify my character going "from" UO to UO2. Yes, I'm a nerd...but, just to clarify, I don't run around in Halloween costumes, engaging in mock sword-fights and screaming "lightning bolt" at passersby.

And UO2's second cancellation was weird, as I'd played an early version and written a preview of it during my second month on the job. In hindsight, I'm thankful no sequel ever went forward, what with UO's last few years' worth of bad turns.

SHAWN: The elimination of a *Team Fortress 2* that looked like *Half-Life 2* Mars and was hidden in the Source software development kit was more false start than cancellation. Still, it sounded sweet—especially in 2005 when I had *HL2* on the brain and no idea what was in store for the *Fortress* series.

SEAN: Yeah, when projects hit the big reset button, it's often for the best. I just Googled "famous game delays" trying to see if it would dislodge any *TV2*-like trankamolators from my brain, and one of the first five or six hits was an article entitled "Video Game Delays Are a Slap in the Face." I would argue that a game that isn't delayed but clearly should have been hits one's face even harder. I knew "when it's done" is a frustrating release date to hear, but it's always the most encouraging. Q4 2008 is the *least* encouraging. That will only be trumped when publishers start prefixing that with the word "fiscal."

SHAWN: Absolutely. 2007's best games—*BioShock*, *Orange Box*, *Call of Duty 4*, *Crysis*, *Quake Wars*, and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*—all benefited from protracted developmental periods. Yes, these are all first-person shooters. And yes, despite Activision's move to ship sequels according to fiscal calendars, the publisher still allows CODH dev Infinity Ward time to invest the details, even as other studios spin out the series' odd-numbered installments.

JEFF: So apparently, we've now all agreed that delays are good. Except when they're bad. Like Duke Nukem Forever bad. I mean, usually a delay means the company is taking the time to make things right. In 3D Realms' case, no rational human thought process can explain WTF has happened here. Anyway, to answer the original question, I'm bummed that we never got the planned sequels to Michel Ancel's *Beyond Good & Evil*. I weep bitter tears to this day about that one.

SEAN: Sometimes what we perceive as a delay is actually just normal development made transparent earlier than usual. It's a fact that some games simply won't get funded if people don't already knew about them. "So, Mister Levine, we hear you want money to make a new game?" "I'm pissed!" "Well, why haven't I heard anything about this game yet?" "Uhhh..." That's a messed-up catch-22 for any developer, and probably why when we first heard about *BioShock* in 2004 it was about Nazis scientists or something. On the other hand, we first learned what *Call of Duty 4* was just a few months before it came out, even though it had been in development for a good long while. I bet that has something to do with the "4."

Profound insight: When a game gets delayed, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad.

ADVERTISER INDEX

Universe at War: Earth Assault

SEGA and Petroglyph unleash a new RTS

Genre: **Real-Time Strategy** Publisher: **SEGA of America** Developer: **Petroglyph Games**
Platforms: **Games for Windows (PC), Xbox 360** Release Date: **Available Now (PC), Q1 2008 (Xbox 360)**

Real-time strategy gamers are desperate for a new, challenging, innovative experience. Sure, existing hit franchises release every few years with minor improvements on the previous releases plus a standard dose of "more of the same" content.

Where's the high-quality innovation and revolutionary RTS excitement, though? Panic not—the RTS landscape is changing with SEGA and Petroglyph Games' epic release, *Universe at War: Earth Assault*™.

The highly rated new sci-fi RTS has been described by the press as "gorgeous," with editors claiming that "the array of strategic options is staggering." Another industry source promises: "If you can't wait another year for *StarCraft® 2*, Petroglyph and SEGA have what you're looking for."

So what's behind all of this hype and anticipation? Essentially, *Universe at War* innovates in the RTS genre with high-quality gameplay featuring some revolutionary game elements: on-the-fly customization of your forces, massive-scale units that dwarf conventional RTS units, and cross-platform multiplayer between PC and Xbox via Games for Windows®—LIVE.

On-the-fly unit customization on the battlefield means players can adjust tactics and refocus their strengths and weaknesses at any time. Did your in-game objectives change mid-mission? Change the abilities and technology of your forces to accommodate the new challenge. Has a new opponent appeared from behind the fog of war? Research new technologies and units to take advantage of your enemy's weak points.

Set on near-future Earth, *Universe at War* features battles between powerful alien forces from across the universe, all of whom are fighting to control our planet. This storyline allows players to command several truly unique factions with awesome powers, spectacular units, individual weaknesses, and unprecedented levels of customization.

Some of the spectacular units are massive alien war machines that are fully customizable. With "Tactical Dynamics" (*Universe at War*'s on-the-fly customization system), you can dynamically swap out weaponry, rework your tech tree, and retrain units in the middle of combat to thwart your foe and seize the advantage. The environments you fight for are close to home, as you wage war across familiar Earth cities and landmarks.

Universe at War also introduces numerous innovative new multiplayer features inspired by today's top MMOs and competitive online games, giving all players Achievements, rewards, and medals in a balanced environment with intelligent matchmaking.

This new real-time strategy game has been developed by Petroglyph, the award-winning studio formed by team members behind the original *Command & Conquer* and *C&C: Red Alert* blockbusters, plus the hugely successful *Star Wars: Empire at War* RTS. Single-player and multiplayer demos are already available online, and you can get more information at www.sega.com/universeatwar.

Games for Windows

Evolve Today!

Renounce society—join BioShock's Cult of Rapture

Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his own brow? Must his brilliance be shared to help the poor—his art censored to shield the weak? Reject these petty constraints of the world you know, and choose to embrace what others deem impossible. Choose Rapture, where your potential is limitless.

Ryan Industries has created specialized Plasmids that break all of the boundaries established by the world above that keep people small, afraid, and ignorant. With just one injection, a Plasmid can genetically modify your DNA to make you what you once only dreamt of becoming. Why be able to modify your car or upgrade your house, but not your body? Why buy and build things to protect, defend, and attack, instead of looking inside at the marvel that is the human form? Perfect yourself, not something else. Be stronger, faster, smarter—there is no limit to what you can become.

With just one dose of Incinerate, Prometheus' fire is in the palm of your hand, and a snap of your fingertips will send it anywhere you wish. Burn the bridges you see before you and build up a new society. Strike down your enemies in a flash of fire.

Open your mind and realize the true power of human potential, where the size of one's muscles no longer decides who is strong or feeble. Lift boulders that Atlas would shrink at the sight of. Whether you wish to strike down an enemy or shield yourself from danger, you can now do so without lifting a finger. Telekinesis brings the weak to their knees.

Keep enemies away with Electric Flesh, a Combat Tonic that insulates your body in a shield of electricity. And even the most complicated inventions can be remade for your use with a treatment of our Engineering Tonics. With the HackSmart line, you can become an expert with vending machines or alarms... even the most complex security systems. Disable or rewire them to work for your purposes without wasting time studying useless information petty people from the world above would spend hours agonizing over.

Freeze your foes where they stand. Do not be constrained by conventional combat; just one flick of your wrist, and Winter Blast encases your enemies in ice. You control the outcome: Let them thaw, or learn the rewards of revenge by bludgeoning them into a thousand pieces with a satisfying smack to the skull.

Control those who once wished to be your puppet master with Enrage, and pull their strings to make your dreams a reality. Crush those who stand in your way with an army whose anger will stomp out all opposition. Blast through any barriers with a smashing blow from another's fist.

Beauty is no longer controlled by outside forces or blessed at birth either, but now dictated by your own imagination. Petty morality does not hold us back any longer. If you can dream it, you can achieve it, create it—and become it.

Join Rapture, and evolve today.

—Elizabeth Tobey, www.cultofrapture.com

Choose Rapture, where your potential is limitless.

Welcome to *The Club*

SEGA's newest quickly ups the bar for the third-person shooters

Serious gamers take note: SEGA and Bizarre Creations—the developer behind critically acclaimed racing series *Project Gotham Racing*® and Xbox LIVE® Arcade smash hit *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*—are delivering a whole new breed of third-person shooter known as *The Club*.

Players take control of a modern-day cast of killers forced to fight for their lives in an underground blood sport controlled by the faceless, obscenely wealthy, influential elite. Battling in abandoned locations spread out across the globe, these modern-day gladiators with guns seek victory for a number of reasons—some for financial gain, some because they have no choice, and some to satisfy their insane bloodlust. No matter the reason, the only thing that guarantees survival is their skill with a gun.

Three of several key areas that make *The Club* a truly great game are:

1) Bizarre Creations' proven track record for creating titles that encourage players to come back for "just one more go."
2) *The Club* has a dark backstory written by Gordon Rennie, the comic book writer who has had numerous tales published in famed British anthology *2000 AD*.
3) A brilliant and unique combo and scoring mechanic gives players room for constant improvement.

The combination of these three elements means that players will find an awesome gaming experience wrapped up in a superb backstory—who could ask for more?

In addition, Rennie provided each of the characters with an in-depth story, and players will discover each contender's true motives and intentions as they battle to dominate their enemies in *The Club*. What's more, two of the eight characters are locked at the very beginning, and each character has a slightly different feel to the way they handle, both in terms of speed and accuracy with certain weapons. On top of this, don't expect to encounter the traditional style of shooter gameplay here either—players will have to think and react fast if they're going to survive this run-and-gun hit. *The Club* also offers gamers yearning for the good old days of four-man split-screen multiplayer exactly that. They can additionally earn respect online in a range of multiplayer modes. Offering everything from leaderboards and death matches to a pack of excitingly unique multiplayer modes, players can face off with seven other opponents online in real-time or stick to battling friends offline in four-player split-screen engagements.

Bizarre Creations also worked hard to create eight magnificent and unusual environments for *The Club*. *The Club* itself is a global network and its members have access to some very interesting settings. Highlights include classical English manor houses, the backstreets of Venice, and shipwrecked ocean liners that are used as playgrounds of death.

In short, *The Club* offers players an exhilarating new gaming experience. There's a rich vein of classic, pure gameplay mixed in with the superior prowess of modern-day, high-definition entertainment. The eight characters allow room for finding nuances that suit individual players, and the eight sprawling environments offer massively varying challenges to even the most hardened gamer.

MATURE 17+
Blood
Strong Language
Violence
ESRB

The Club is out early November 2008 on PC, Xbox 360™ and PLAYSTATION® 3

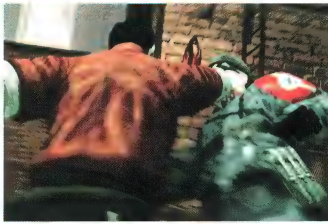
Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

Codemasters offers an alternate take on World War II

Genre: **First-Person Shooter** Publisher: **Codemasters** Developer: **Spark Unlimited**
Platforms: **Games for Windows (PC), Xbox 360** Release Date: **Q1 2008**

Turning Point™: Fall of Liberty sees World War II take a catastrophic turn as a superior Nazi force attacks New York and goes on to take over the United States. As a civilian caught in the middle of the Third Reich's occupation of America, fight afresh against the world's most notorious war machine on the streets of Manhattan, Washington, D.C., and beyond. Use guerrilla tactics and the surroundings to overcome superior postwar Axis weaponry and fight the occupation.

Delivering both wartime authenticity and a fresh perspective through an intense, action-driven storyline, Turning Point: Fall of Liberty makes war personal and relevant. Presenting this scenario as a powerful and realistically crafted alternate history, Turning Point: Fall of Liberty delivers an explosive FPS experience in a world where famous real-world locations appear startlingly different under Nazi occupation.



•Witness the Third Reich's Epic Occupation of the U.S. and Europe
- –An oppressed, occupied America and Europe comes to life against a backdrop of globally recognized landmarks in New York, Washington D.C., and London.
- –Engage in nonstop action and guerrilla tactics to overcome superior Axis weaponry.

•Experience Combat More Personal Than Ever
- –Make a difference as a WWII resistance hero.
- –In-depth grappling system features environmental kills and human shields.

•Participate in Epic, Cinematic Gameplay from Start to Finish
- –Best-in-class gameplay from Spark Unlimited.
- –Online multiplayer, soundtrack from renowned composer Michael Giacchino, and more.

If you can't find it here, it doesn't exist.
Just thought we'd make that clear from the start.

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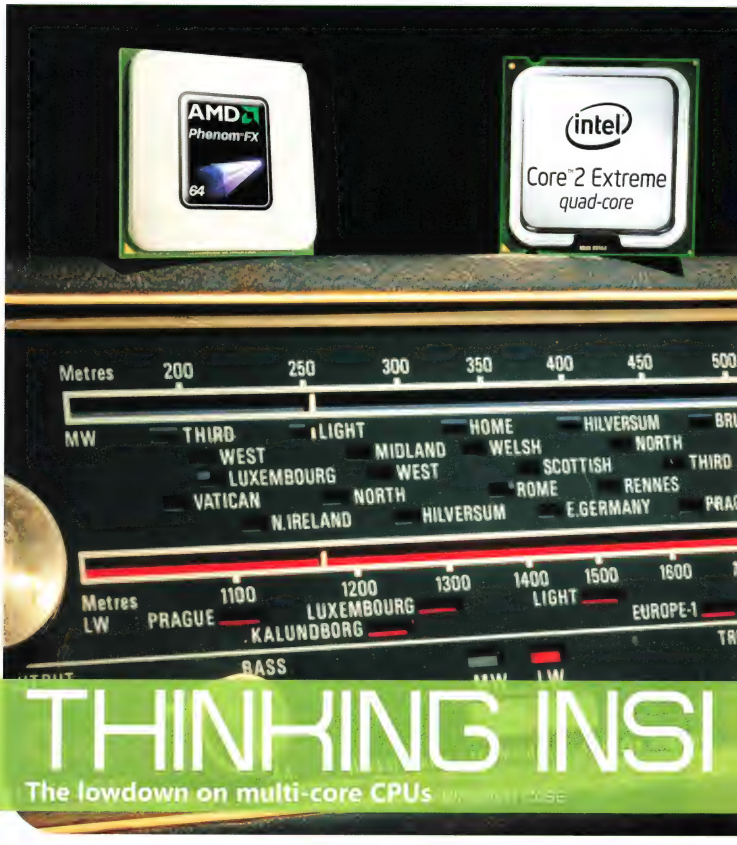

THINKING INSI

The lowdown on multi-core CPUs

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The first transistor radios had four transistors (in tube form, no less). Today, a dual-core processor has 410 million. A single quad core contains 840 million.

FEATURE

Eighteen months ago, AMD could do no wrong. As Intel lumbered along in 2005, the scrappy CPU maker owned gaming and released the original Athlon 64 X2 4800+, the first true dual-core chip that we once crowned "the best desktop processor yet." Now black is white, up is down, and Intel is back on top of the gaming CPU heap. What the hell happened?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MULTI-CORE

It began with a little hubris and a big gamble. As AMD rode on the success of its Athlon 64 X2 processors, Intel took it slow. AMD's X2 CPUs generally outpaced Intel's equivalent dual-core efforts and absolutely crushed Intel in game performance. Plus, they generally ran cooler and used less power. And when it looked like the industry would move to quad-core CPUs, AMD embarked on an ambitious program to put four cores on a single chip.

Meanwhile, Intel got a bright idea from its Israeli design team, which had cranked out the relatively small (in terms of die size), low-power-but-very-efficient Pentium M—the brains behind Intel's Centrino mobile platform. All that notebookcentric hoopla hid the fact that the Pentium M ran rings around the Intel desktop CPUs at the same clock rate.

So Intel canceled some internal projects and shifted its efforts to building a wide-ranging architecture based on the ideas behind the Pentium M. The result was the Core 2 architecture. Yep, all the success Intel basks in right now with the Core 2 Duo and the Core 2 Quad are all thanks to a smart notebook processor.

While AMD slaved away on their holy mission to build a true quad-core CPU, Intel took practical lessons it had learned from the Pentium D and built the Core 2 Quad line. Intel shipped a quad-core CPU seven months before AMD's first quad-core server CPUs and a year before AMD's first desktop quad-core CPU, Phenom, saw the light of day. Adding insult to injury, Intel now ships CPUs built on its more advanced 45nm manufacturing process, even as AMD struggles to ship its quad-core CPUs at 65nm. (*Cliffs Notes*–equivalent explanation of die size: The XXnm manufacturing process refers to the size of the CPU circuit board. Smaller chips are more efficient, requiring less energy, and can run faster.)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PC GAMERS?

Thanks to competitive pricing, this means you can get some good CPUs for cheap. Well, relatively cheap. Just remember that AMD Athlon 64 X2s didn't suddenly start sucking the second Intel shipped Core 2—AMD CPUs were just slower than Intel's. A word of advice: Any $250 processor will deliver close to the same performance in games—so don't get hung up on what you buy. Whether you pick up the latest dual-core or quad-core CPU, you'll almost certainly have adequate performance if it's anything above entry-level.

Just bear in mind that a fast dual-core CPU—such as Intel's Core 2 Duo E6850—may be a better solution than a slower quad-core processor for PC games for the immediate future. More to the point, it's not just about CPUs. In fact, if you factor in graphics, a fast videocard can often make a bigger difference than a faster CPU, particularly in modern PC games that run at higher resolutions. >

DE THE BOX

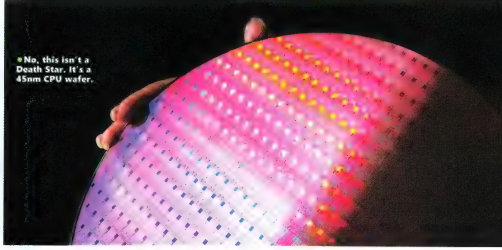
THE CHIPSET TRIANGLE

Every motherboard has one or more chips commonly known as the chipset (or sometimes core logic). These chips are the traffic cops of your PC, shuttling data around the system. And in an era where a gamer's system may have more than one graphics card, the chipset plays a critical part in your rig.

AMD, Intel, and Nvidia all make chipsets, which show up on a variety of motherboards. Picking the right motherboard is an exercise in frustration, particularly if you're interested in running more than one graphics card. Here's how it shakes out:

- If you want SLI (scalable link interface)—multiple Nvidia-based cards that can combine for additional 3D performance—then you need a motherboard with an Nvidia chipset. This is particularly true for the bordering-on-insane three-way SLI that's coming out now.
- The exception to the above rule is that Intel's Skulltrail platform, which uses two Xeon processors (up to eight cores), will support SLI through the use of an Nvidia chip *in addition* to the Intel chipset.
- AMD/ATI Crossfire dual-graphics card setups will work in either an AMD 790FX system or, ironically, in most Intel chipset-based motherboards, including the D975X, P965, P35, X38, and X48 chipsets.
- Quad Crossfire (three or even four graphics cards) only works in AMD 790FX motherboards.

This ridiculously confusing set of options ultimately limits the impact of multiple graphics card systems. For multiple GPU systems to become common, someone needs to lock Intel, Nvidia, and AMD into a small room sans soap until they all agree on a multi-GPU standard.



No, this isn't a Death Star. It's a 45nm CPU wafer.

SO WHICH IS BEST FOR ME?

If you're going to squeeze an answer out of us, it has to be a system with an Intel Core 2 Duo or Core 2 Quad. If you're at all comfortable with overclocking, stay away from the Extreme-branded CPUs. It's very likely you can hit 3GHz with a Core 2 Quad Q6600 or Q6700. And you can get a 3GHz dual-core Core 2 Duo E6850 for around $300.

Of course, by the time you read this, it's likely that Intel will be shipping new mainstream dual-core and quad-core CPUs built on their 45nm manufacturing process. It's worth getting one of those, provided the price is right.

If you must have dual graphics cards, you need an Nvidia chipset motherboard. The newer Nvidia 780i boards have had a few teething problems, and it may be a little early in that product's life cycle to wholeheartedly recommend them. On the other hand, the older 680i chipsets don't handle 45nm Intel CPUs particularly well. So go for this only if you *really* want SLI.

The Intel X38- and X48-based motherboards seem rock-solid. You can, of course, run a pair of ATI boards in them in CrossFire mode, if you like. But for most gamers, a single graphics card should work just fine, provided it's an AMD HD 3870, Nvidia 8800 GT, or better.

THE FUTURE IS CLOUDY

What about six months or a year from now? Will AMD shape up and ship 45nm quad-core processors before Intel gets its next generation Nehalem CPU out the door? Can AMD catch up with Nvidia on the high end instead of forcing out lower-margin, lower-cost boards with about as much sex appeal as a potato? Will Nvidia ever relent and allow SLI to run on non-Nvidia desktop motherboards?

If we were betting men—OK, we are—we'll give 2-to-1 odds that Intel and Nvidia will keep rolling along with AMD picking up whatever crumbs get left behind. That's unfortunate because AMD has a lot of great ideas and cool technology, and we love seeing competition inspire new designs.

So here's hoping that we're wrong about those odds.

A CPU SNAPSHOT

Breaking down the ongoing battle between AMD and Intel

Intel

AMD

GAMING PERFORMANCE

SEPTEMBER 2003: AMD ships Athlon 64 processors. The FX-51 clocks at 2.2GHz, pushing past Intel in gaming performance despite Intel's Pentium Extreme Edition launch.

MAY 2005: AMD begins shipping Athlon 64 X2 4800+; AMD's dual core CPU crushes Intel's dual-core processor in games.

JULY 2006: Intel fires back. The Core 2 Extreme runs at "only" 2.93 GHz, but it outruns everything else by huge margins. Even the mainstream Core 2 E6700 crushes the competition. AMD responds by cutting prices.

2008 AND BEYOND: Expect dual-core versions of the AMD K10 processor, higher clocked Phenoms, and triple-core Phenoms to arrive on the scene. AMD will attempt the move to 45nm manufacturing.

Meanwhile, Intel will up the frontside bus (FSB) clocks to 1,600MHz around March or April. However, the big news for Intel is the arrival of a brand-new architecture, "Nehalem," late in the year. Nehalem will feature a new processor bus and an integrated memory controller, removing the bottlenecks inherent in the old FSB architecture.

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1UP NETWORK

PRODUCT: **Phenom 9600** MANUFACTURER: **AMD**
PRICE: **$275** URL: **www.amd.com**

REVIEW

AMD's "true quad core" CPU, aka the Phenom, has finally arrived. A Phenom 9600 will set you back about $275—not too shabby for a 2.3GHz quad-core processor—but was it worth the wait? In order to gauge this processor's measure, we decided to match it up against Intel's comparable 2.4GHz Core 2 Quad Q6600, which costs a mere $280. Should be an interesting matchup, right?

Before diving into numbers, it's worth looking at how you'd build a Phenom today. AMD has been touting the company's "Spider" platform, which consists of motherboards built using the new AMD 790FX chipset, the AMD HD 3800 series of graphics cards, and the Phenom processor working together. We'd expect the three to form a giant robot considering all the promises AMD's made. The company claims that this would be the most balanced solution, offering good performance and lower power utilization than Intel's offerings. For the sake of testing, we're looking at two pieces of the Spider platform: CPU and core logic.

THE MATCHUP

For this CPU shootout, we built a test system sporting an ASUS M3A32-MVP Deluxe motherboard, which uses the AMD 790FX chipset, complete with socket AM2 support. The new chipset supports up to four PCI Express x16 connections, though if you drop in four graphics cards, the slots run in x8 mode. Of course, if you're looking to install four graphics cards, you officially have too much money. But we digress. We also built a comparably stacked Intel rig.

Intel has a minor clock-rate advantage, but AMD should have a latency edge over Intel thanks to our 790FX motherboard. In both our machines: one Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTS 320MB. With similar speeds and suited with identical graphics cards, our machines are ready to jump off the starting line.

TEST TAKING

For the sake of our tests, we picked a host of new RTS and FPS games and dropped the resolution and detail sliders down. (Why? Cranked high, you start hitting bottlenecks usually associated with the graphics cards.) At lower resolutions and lower detail settings, you can really see a CPU strut its stuff. In RTS games like *Company of Heroes* and *World in Conflict*, Intel smokes AMD by a healthy margin. It's the same story with *Prey*, *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, and *Team Fortress 2*. Even after scaling up the resolution and detail levels, Phenom generally can't keep up.

Our AMD rig even needed to stop and catch its breath a couple times during the marathon. *Supreme Commander* crashed several times, and *Quake Wars* completely locked up once. Thermal issues weren't the culprit—we're guessing that it's a BIOS update or two away from getting fixed.

THE LETDOWN

This is what we waited for? Oh sure, the processor is what it is—and it's certainly priced about right for what you get—but the whole thing just doesn't feel ready. With stability and compatibility issues right out the gate, it seems like a work in progress. Considering how long it's taken AMD to yank this horse out of the stable, we expect a bona fide thoroughbred. Maybe new BIOS drivers can mend a motherboard, but performance is another matter. We might have to wait for a 45nm die chip before we see some real power. That is, *if* there's a 45nm chip in AMD's future. **Loyd Case**

AMD finally launches its Phenom processor to the sound of mixed applause—mostly from surprise. Can the scrappy CPU maker stage a comeback?

VERDICT

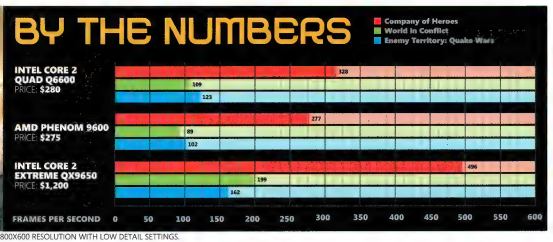
- **Four cores on a single die; potentially efficient multi-core scaling—eventually.**
- **Lower performance than a similarly stacked Intel CPU.**

5\10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

NOT SO PHENOM-ENAL

AMD's quad-core CPU is finally here—hurray?

BY THE NUMBERS



NOTE: ALL GAME BENCHMARKS RUN AT 800X600 RESOLUTION WITH LOW DETAIL SETTINGS.

POWERHOUSE PREVIEW

Quad-core heavyweight fight: Intel QX9770 vs. AMD Phenom 9900

PRODUCT: **QX9770** MANUFACTURER: **Intel**
PRICE: **N/A** URL: **www.intel.com**

PRODUCT: **Phenom 9900** MANUFACTURER: **AMD**
PRICE: **N/A** URL: **www.amd.com**

PREVIEW

Intel doesn't have much to prove at this point except that it can keep building a better CPU. Just don't expect it to come cheap.

Question: Why would Intel preannounce a processor that no motherboard today can officially support?

Answer: To lay the smack down.

Just as AMD seems to be pulling it together—finally opening up about its quad-core plans—Intel comes along and kicks sand in their face. Again. We recently got hands-on time with AMD's "high-end" Phenom 9900 to see what it could do under controlled conditions. AMD built and set up our 790FX-based motherboard. Our tools: synthetic benchmarks (but no games) on their terms.

You can't buy it today. You probably won't even see it on shelves until March. Then again, you could say the same thing about Intel's Core 2 Extreme QX9770. Intel's first desktop 400MHz frontside bus (FSB) CPU ships in the early part of 2008, and there's no motherboard for sale that officially supports it. Yet Intel tossed us a couple of QX9770 chips, essentially saying, "bring it."

We did. While this is hardly a true head-to-head situation—and neither processor is anywhere near ready for a proper review—you deserve a heads-up on what the upcoming top-dollar gear can do.

NOW ABOUT THAT MOTHERBOARD...

We used the Asus Maximus Extreme motherboard, which houses the Intel X38 core logic. This high-end board allows for easy overclocking of the FSB, which is necessary for our tests. After all, no system today officially supports a 400MHz FSB unless you wanna wait for the X48 chipset to ship sometime in early 2008. Yep, right around the same time, you'll likely see the QX9770 on shelves. Notice a pattern here?

THE NUMBERS GAME

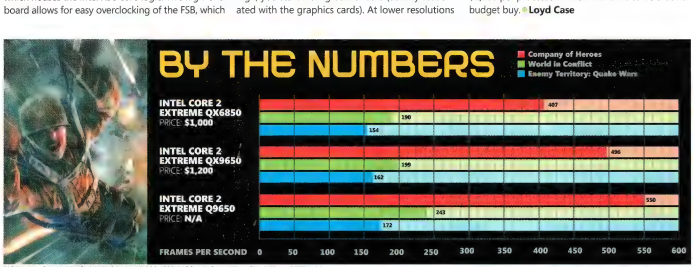
Since we didn't have full access to a proper testing environment, AMD unfortunately gets the short shrift here, but them's the breaks. (For what it's worth, *GFW* contributing editor and ExtremeTech.com editor Jason Cross dissected what he could of AMD's Spider—while Intel won't squash it, AMD will need to price the 9900 fairly aggressively just to compete.)

Here's what we do know: Intel packs heat. We threw three different levels of Core 2 Quad CPUs into the ring so that you could get a better idea of how well each performs. Again, we grabbed some new RTS and FPS games then dropped the resolution and detail sliders. Why? What, you forgot the answer from the last page? Cranked high, you start hitting bottlenecks (usually associated with the graphics cards). At lower resolutions and lower detail settings, you get a better gauge of a CPU's power—especially in the games we've chosen here.

You can take away an interesting lesson from these numbers (if you didn't already put it together for yourself): Even if you're powering through games at higher resolutions, there comes a point of no return. You can drop over $1,000 on a new CPU, but that won't always buy you the big leap in performance you seek. Take *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*—running at 1280x1024 with high detail settings, the QX9650 runs *three* frames per second faster than the QX6850. Want better numbers? Dig out that credit card and plug in a better GPU.

CLOSING THE CASE

As we said at the beginning, you can't buy either processor at the moment. You probably won't be able to buy the Phenom 9900 or QX9770 for another three months. Neither company has tipped their hat yet on price. Our best guess: Intel will top $1,200 per processor while AMD aims to be a better budget buy. **Loyd Case**



NOTE: ALL GAME BENCHMARKS RUN AT 800X600 RESOLUTION WITH LOW DETAIL SETTINGS

TECH TOOLBOX

Want to follow along without reading Tech Tune-Up guilt-free? Here's what you need.

REQUIRED READING

TweakGuides Tweaking Companion

Game Tweak Guides

TOOLS

Fraps

RivaTuner

Koroush Ghazi

Koroush Ghazi knows a thing or two about tweaking tech.

HOW-TO

TECH TU

The many faces of lag

At some point, every gamer experiences lag; this blanket term describes that frustrating feeling of delayed responsiveness, almost as if your mouse is mired in molasses. What people don't realize is that there are multiple causes of lag in both online and offline games and several ways to resolve it depending on the cause. First, though, you need to identify the true source of the problem.

GRAPHICS LAG

The most common culprit is graphics-based lag, often mistakenly referred to as "mouse lag" or "control lag." In reality, it has nothing to do with your mouse or keyboard settings—the root cause of this type of lag is low framerates. Put simply, the graphical strain on your PC causes your system to produce fewer frames per second (fps), and because each new frame takes a fraction of a second longer to get to the screen, there's a slight delay between your actions and their visible results. This type of lag usually occurs during heavy combat when fighting in areas of rich graphical detail such as smoke, gunfire, or explosion effects, in large outdoor areas, or when zooming in with a sniper rifle.

To diagnose graphics lag, monitor your fps using the free Fraps utility (See "Tech Toolbox," above). Depending on the game, if your framerate falls below anywhere from 15fps to 25fps (depending on the game), you'll start to notice lag. The only real solution is to lower your settings; in particular, try disabling vertical sync, since it only makes lag worse (for reasons why, see Tech Tune-Up, *GFW* #12, pg. 108).

MOUSE LAG

Although most mouse lag is actually graphics lag in disguise, it is possible to have lagging responsiveness at higher fps ratings. If you haven't installed the latest graphics, audio, and motherboard drivers for your PC, you may get strange and laggy input behavior, so make sure you update all your drivers as detailed in the TweakGuides Tweaking Companion (see "Tech Toolbox," above). However, one setting in particular can cause unnecessary lag: mouse smoothing. Usually, it's an in-game option, and if turned on it tries to average out your mouse movements to make them feel smoother. The problem is that it only makes things feel laggier, so you're better off disabling it.

STUTTER LAG

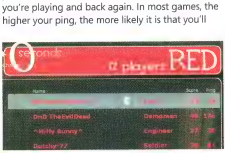
We've discussed stuttering in detail in this column (see *GFW* #11, pg. 94). The basic causes of it are your system pausing to load new information from your hard drive into system RAM or your graphics card momentarily freezing as it swaps new data into its video RAM. Either way, if your game exhibits frequent stuttering or hitching of this kind, a sudden fps drop and loss of responsiveness usually accompanies each pause. If you didn't catch our stuttering guide in *GFW* #11, work through the TweakGuides Tweaking Companion and any

relevant game guides at www.tweakguides.com. One quick tip for online gamers: When joining a server, first view the game in spectator mode for a minute—this helps preload more data and reduces annoying stutters when you actually start playing.

> WHEN JOINING A SERVER, FIRST VIEW THE GAME IN SPECTATOR MODE FOR A MINUTE. THIS HELPS REDUCE ANNOYING STUTTERS

PING LAG

This form of lag only occurs in online gaming. Your ping is a measure of the amount of time it takes (in milliseconds) for game information to travel from your PC over the Internet to the server on which you're playing and back again. In most games, the higher your ping, the more likely it is that you'll miss what you're shooting at, or that your actions go out of sync with what you see on the screen.



Your ping is usually on the scoreboard.

The best way to prevent ping lag is to connect only to servers that are physically located close to you, and hence give you consistently low ping (below 100 is good). For optimal ping, use the free SpeedTest site (See "Tech Toolbox," above) to measure your actual connection speed, as it's often lower than the speed advertised by your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Next, make sure your in-game connection speed is set to match this actual speed, or even a notch below, so that the game never tries to process more data than your connection is capable of handling.

By the way, if things start "warping" around or become extremely jerky during online gameplay, this is either a sign of extremely high ping or, more commonly, is due to packet loss—which, as the name implies, is the result of data being lost on the way to or from the server. Try other servers—if it still keeps happening, the issue is most likely with your connection, so contact your ISP for assistance.

LAG STORM

Keep in mind that several types of lag can hit you all at once. Think of the moment you run into an enemy for the first time, guns blazing—that's exactly when you're most likely to hit lag. Why? Because your system is suddenly dealing with more graphics information, which can dip your fps and cause graphics lag. Some of the graphics and sound effects data load up for the first time, which introduces some stutter lag. Then there's the lag that comes with playing an online game. If you have more than one person racing around, the effects of any ping lag become obvious since even a slight delay means your shots may miss the target. Now you know better. Having learned the causes of lag, you now have all you need to get in there and stop it from happening again.

NE-UP

GREENSPEAK

Because we have the extra page

USE YOUR ILLUSION

Or: For those about to rock, we press the Spacebar

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Prior to becoming an editor, Jeff was the lead bassist in the acclaimed band Courtesy Flush. Ask for an autograph at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

As my dear old grandmother used to say to me, there is a time and place for everything. Well, actually, she never said anything of the sort. What she usually said, to beleaguered waiters all over San Francisco, was "Please don't cook that in butter. I don't like butter." But that doesn't really help me out here. The point is, there really is a time and place for everything, even if my grandma was too preoccupied with her hatred of butter to point this out to me.

This particular homily comes to mind, in any event, and is one I share with you now because, as I write this, I am staring at the press release for the PC version of *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock*, and I am, quite frankly, a bit bewildered. The release starts off well enough, with the somewhat obvious pronouncement that "your computer doesn't rock hard enough." Fair enough. It does not. I grant you that if Lemmy from Motorhead stopped by my house, perhaps to borrow some sugar, and he noticed my PC, he would not raise his fist in salute and ask me to join the band. The press release is right about that.

However, just a few paragraphs later, they carry things too far. Allow me to quote directly:

"We love PC gaming because it usually involves our old friends the keyboard and mouse. While Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock *is primarily meant to be played with your guitar controller, give it a whirl with your keyboard or keyboard/mouse. This feature truly separates* GHIII PC *from its console counterparts and allows folks to jam out at the office, on a plane, or wherever they are with their PC."*

Now, let me say first that I love *Guitar Hero III*. Maybe not as much as *I* or *II*, because I hate the boss battles, and there is far too much hair metal this time around (note to developers: Poison are neither "legends" nor "rock"), but still, I am a sucker in general for this whole Fisher-Price pretend-musician genre. As someone who has been playing air guitar since the 1970s, back when everyone in Aerosmith still had their original blood, I appreciate the ability to hold a plastic guitar while jamming, which adds a degree of verisimilitude to my sad rock star fantasies.

And while I appreciate, in theory, the good effort made to port this game to the PC, so that we too may rock mightily, I am going to just put it out there that there is no way one can actually rock mightily with a keyboard and mouse. It is the guitar or nothing with this game. Period. If you are sitting at your computer and jiggling the mouse back and forth on your desk (the PC equivalent of the guitar's whammy bar), I submit that, contrary to whatever is going on in your head, you are not, in fact, rocking out. I am sorry. You are not doing anything, in fact, except looking like a complete moron. And if you're doing this on an airplane? Dude. Stop. No one should be forced to sit next to that.

Now I know that the guitar is not really a guitar. That, in the abstract, pressing the buttons on one piece of plastic is not any different from doing it on another. Except that it is. *Guitar Hero III* is all about—guess what—the guitar. The fetishism of holding that device. It's about the fantasy, the pose, the illusion of you wielding your axe onstage. Take away the guitar and the illusion is gone. Reality comes crashing in: You are not playing music. You are matching button presses to colors on the screen. You are not a rock star. You are a lab monkey.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN WILCOX

I bring this entire issue up because it is the most glaring example in recent memory of a larger problem: the inappropriateness, at worst, and the awkwardness, at best, of bringing certain console games to the PC. Because in a great many cases, the gameplay is intrinsically tied to the control scheme—the particular piece of plastic the gamer has in their hands—and if you take that away, or substitute in a different piece of plastic, you introduce a fundamental disconnect into the gamer's brain. It's a problem we've now seen, despite valiant efforts by the developers, on other recent ports, such as *Viva Piñata* and *Gears of War.*

The best control schemes (and often, by extension, the best games) are the ones that make us forget we are holding a controller. Nintendo's Wii Remote, of course, is Exhibit A, and that system's wild success is no accident: It's the first console system ever that really, truly makes people forget exactly what it is they are doing. But even a standard gamepad (or keyboard), when done right, can make this happen—letting you fire a weapon, swing a golf club, run through a field, or scale a wall without reminding you that, in reality, you are not a rock star or rugged soldier or professional athlete, but just another pasty-faced dweeb holding an input device.

I don't mean to sound like an ingrate. "Hey—no thanks for the port!" And in *Guitar Hero III*'s case, you do, of course, get the guitar in the box. My point is that if you can't play a game the "right" way, the way the developers conceived it in the first place, maybe it's better not to play at all. Or, as Radiohead—actual non-plastic-guitar-wielding rock stars—once said, and as my grandma might have agreed with: "Everything in its right place." ●

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